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HIM
A DEAL WITH THE DEVIL

THE STRANGERS
TIME FOR CHAPTER 2

SPACE: 1999
CELEBRATING 50 YEARS

GEN V
THE BOYS GO BACK TO SCHOOL

STRANGER THINGS
MORE UNSEEN SET INTERVIEWS!

BATTLE-WORLD EXCLUSIVE!

LET THE HUNT BEGIN

PREDATOR

BADLANDS

DAN TRACHTENBERG ON HIS YAUTJA RENAISSANCE!

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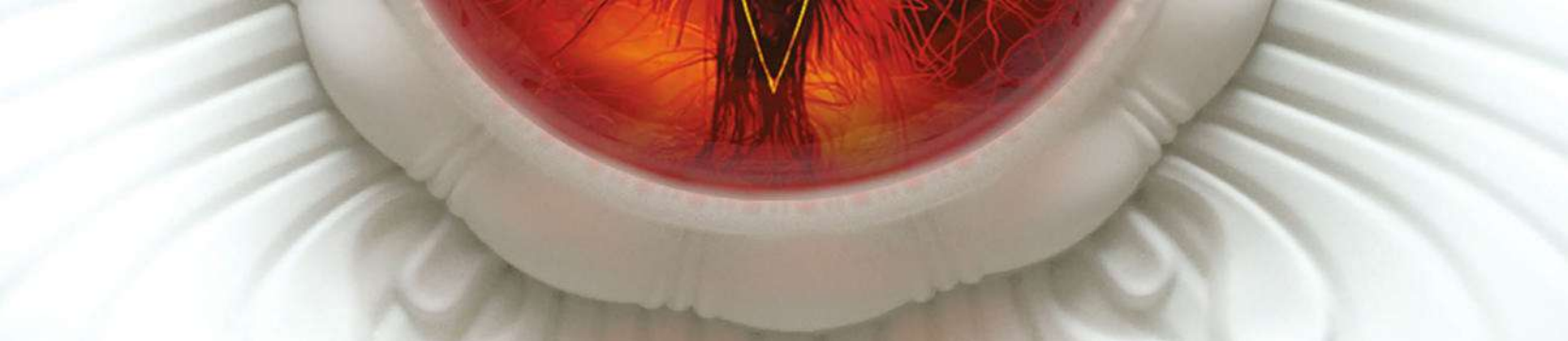

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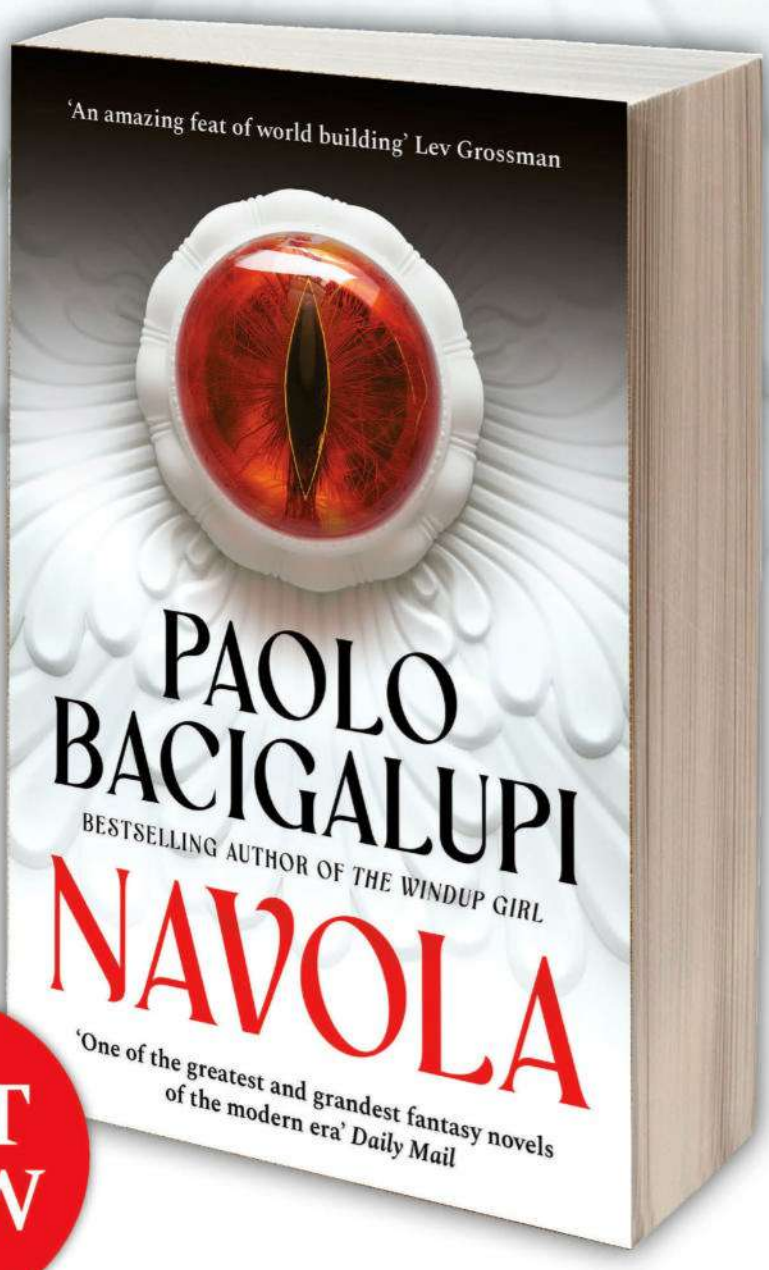
'An amazing feat of world building' Lev Grossman
PAOLO BACIGALUPI
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE WINDUP GIRL
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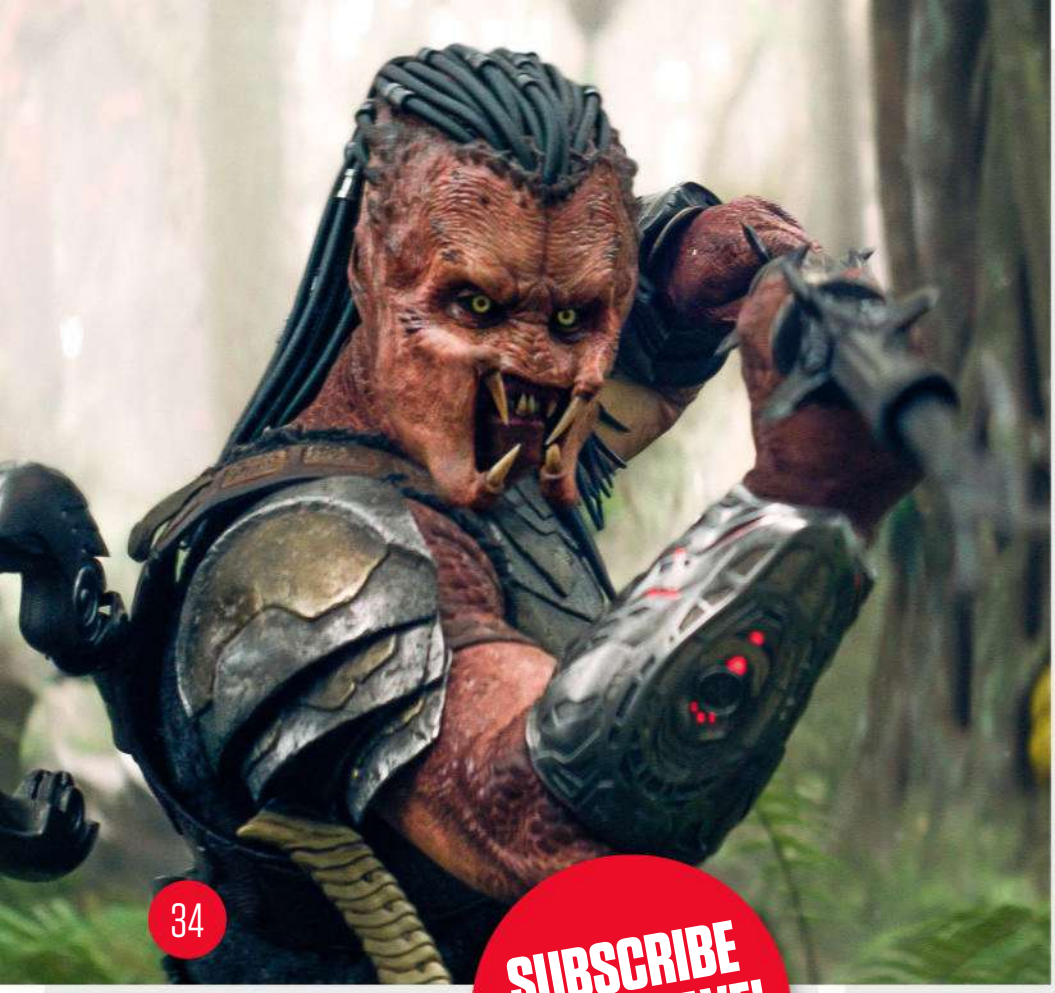

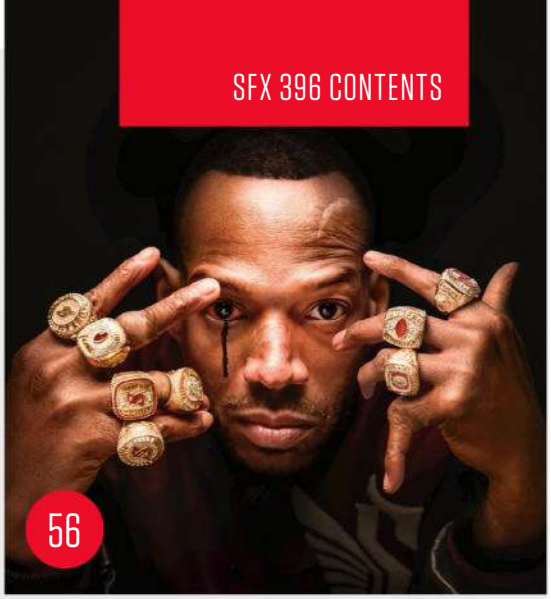

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Head to page 33 for details

FEATURES

34 PREDATOR: BADLANDS
We're hunting high and low.

44 TRON: ARES
Let there be Light Cycles!

52 THE STRANGERS: CHAPTER 2
It's them lot at the bloody door again...

56 HIM
The gridiron gets gruesome.

60 GEN V
The young Supes are back in season two.

64 STRANGER THINGS
Why season three was mall or nothing.

72 SPACE: 1999
Fifty years of the original Generation Alpha.

RED ALERT

6 LEGO STAR WARS
Building a galaxy, brick by brick.

8 DOCTOR WHO: ALIXION
Unmade Seventh Doctor story gets made shocker!

11 THE DROWNED
Water way to go in a mythic horror.

16 DOUG NAYLOR
Set course for new kids' book *Sin Bin Island*.

30 CONAN CROSSOVER COMIC
Bar-bar-bar, bar-barian...

REVIEWS

82 THE LONG WALK
New Stephen King adap gives us blisters.

84 STAR TREK: STRANGE NEW WORLDS
Season three gets the tricorder treatment.

86 OBJECT Z
Vintage TV hurtles toward us.

92 CROSSROADS OF RAVENS
Aka *I Was A Teenage Geralt*.

98 ULTIMATE SPIDER-MAN: INCURSION
What on Earth-6160 is going on?

REGULARS

78 BROUGHT TO BOOK
Andrzej Sapkowski is having none of our nonsense...

97 THE WRITE STUFF
Stephen Baxter answers our author questionnaire.

102 FLASHBACK
Cut the crop as we return to August 2002.

104 BLASTERMIND
You've got to Roald with it.

106 TOTAL RECALL
How *The Witches* cast a spell.

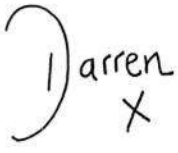
Captain's Log

This year has been, somewhat unexpectedly considering I'm the editor of the magazine you're reading, a bit of a treat for me in terms of all things *Predator* and *Alien*. That's an understatement, of course, it's been so exciting to work on *Alien: Earth* first and then *Predator: Badlands*. Not only that, but to see such a positive reaction from fandom for both projects. C'mon, we all know what fandoms can be like!

Weyland-Yutani is, obviously, the thread that connects both these projects – despite the previous *AvP* movies having done this before (yes, I love them! Sue me!) I'm really looking forward to seeing what comes next on both sides of the battle. It really feels like both franchises are in the best of hands, which I'm sure will make a lot of naysayers happy! Or as happy as those chronically online can be, at least...

Another franchise returning this month is *Tron*, and *SFX* was on set – actual physical sets! – in Canada, to get the lowdown (and ride a Light Cycle, as you do). Plus we celebrate 50 years of *Space: 1999* – I know, how did that happen? – and dig into our archives for more unpublished treats from the set of *Stranger Things* season three. No *ST* news page this month though, as there's just too much to fit in. Enjoy!

See you in four weeks.



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Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind

DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ Amy Madigan and Marlon Wayans deserve all the awards for *Weapons* and *HIM*, two incredible original horror projects.

→ I'm *very* excited for *It: Welcome To Derry*.

RANTS

→ By the time this issue comes out, I'll have returned from Halloween Horror Nights. Booo! Roll on the anniversary in 2026.

→ Could really do with some major sci-fi shows going into production soon!

IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ Loving "Marked To Kill" by Federation, an imagined '80s pop hit all about *Blake's 7*: bit.ly/federationmarked.

→ I'm regularly impressed by the Radiance label's Blu-ray releases, so I'm looking forward to seeing what emerges from Transmission, their new imprint focusing on "offbeat cult classics".

→ If you need a quick pick me up, search for "Zoom Space Rescue" on YouTube.

JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RAVES

→ The season two trailer has got me so excited for the return of *Fallout*.

RANTS

→ Don't get me wrong, *Alien: Earth* has been great so far, but do we really need quite so much exposition? Genre fans don't need to be spoon-fed.

NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR AT LARGE

RAVES

→ BBC 2's Moviedrome was an education for so many of us. Check out a great in-depth discussion with host Alex Cox and producer Nick Freand Jones, presented by Samira Ahmed at the BFI: bit.ly/coxqanda.

→ The Roddenberry Archive has a new doc on the unmade '70s *Star Trek* series, something that's always fascinated me: bit.ly/70strek.

TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

→ *Lego Star Wars: Rebuild The Galaxy – Pieces Of The Past* expands on the very funny original with even more surprise remixes, OG voices, and a great villain from Dan Stevens.

RANTS

→ *Resident Alien* ended on a high note, but I'll be forever mad that it didn't get five seasons.

THE FUTURE FIRST!

Red Alert

OCTOBER 2025

NEWS //// INTERVIEWS //// INSIGHT //// NITRO-9!

26

GHOULS ALLOWED

Rick and Morty's Matt Roller invites you to his Haunted Hotel

Highlights

10
BATTLEWORLD
Marvel's finest end up in the back of beyond(er) once again. Who wins? One way to find out!

12
THE ASTRONAUT
Being followed home from work is bad enough, but when your job means you work in outer space...

22
THE SISTERS GRIMM
An animated adaptation of Michael Buckley's YA books comes to Apple TV+.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Build High For Happiness

Cast and creators return for new miniseries **Lego Star Wars: Rebuild The Galaxy – Pieces Of The Past**

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

LAST YEAR'S ORIGINAL DISNEY+ animated miniseries *Lego Star Wars: Rebuild The Galaxy* introduced the trials and tribulations of *Lego Star Wars* galaxy residents (and warring brothers) Sig Greebling (Gaten Matarazzo) and Dev Greebling (Tony Revolori). Sig's accidental removal of the all-powerful Cornerstone brick ended up remaking the universe as we know it and introduced them to remixed characters like Darth Jar Jar (Ahmed Best), Darth Rey (Helen Slater), burned-out ex-podracer Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) and the Landolorian (Billy Dee Williams).

This Autumn the brothers, Jedi Bob (Bobby Moynihan), Yesi Scala (Marsai Martin) and many others return for a new miniseries, *Lego Star Wars: Rebuild The Galaxy – Pieces Of The Past*, where they're all still dealing with the fallout of that bad decision. And they've got a new Big Bad to battle in Solitus (Dan Stevens), a fallen Jedi who gains access to the powerful Forcehold realm.

Writers/executive producers Dan Hernandez and Benji Samit are also back and tell Red Alert that in this series the estranged brothers will have to come together to battle Solitus. "We hadn't seen this brotherly relationship as much [in *Star Wars*], so I always thought that if we were so fortunate as to be able to continue, what would it mean to really have this relationship explored more fully over the course of these four episodes?" Hernandez says of their creative focus this time.

"We pick that [arc] up and see this didn't happen in a vacuum. There are consequences and there are changing feelings," he continues about their unresolved impasse. "There are complicated feelings on both sides, and that was one of the rich emotional places that we were both excited to explore further."

Then there's just lots of fun *Star Wars* remixes to play with too. Samit says they asked themselves how far they could go this time in terms of platforming fan-centric deep cuts and Easter eggs.

"Can we go to Jaxxon T Tumperakki?" Samit says of the obscure Rebellion Alliance smuggler *Legends* character they put in this miniseries. "We've never seen him come to life in animation, or live, so that was what we were excited for. Then on the Lego side of things, we started thinking there's more to the Lego Universe than just the minifigs and those play sets. There are BrickHeadz and the giant buildable Chewbacca. How can we touch every end of these fandoms to really celebrate them even deeper?"

> **"Anthony Daniels told us he'd always wanted to be a more roguish C-3PO"**

They also got to create their own bespoke villain in Solitus, who also functions as a meta commentary on those who judge Lego aficionados. "When you set out to write these stories, the best way to put them together is to try to think of a top-line, philosophical question that you're trying to answer," Hernandez explains.

"There are so many fantastic bad guys and villains in the existing *Star Wars* galaxy but we felt that if the first story was about the power of creation, as opposed to the power of destruction – building versus breaking – in order to complicate this story, we needed to have a third level of understanding, which was void, or absence.

"Even if you're breaking your Lego, as the Sith breakers do in the first special, you're still *using* Lego. You're still on some level playing, just maybe not the way that our Jedi characters might. There's still an engagement with the core concept.

"We decided, what is one step beyond that? And that's nothing. And if we're really speaking metatextually, if the first season is about how

Dev, Sig and Servo meet Jaxxon in Forcehold.

Sig Greebling (voiced by Gaten Matarazzo).

It's a mixed up, muddled up, shook up world.

kids really play with their Lego, we thought to ourselves, wouldn't the next level be for someone to ask, 'Why are you even playing? That's not sophisticated, or orderly. It's chaotic. Grow up.' And that was the genesis of where the Solitus character came from, because we needed someone to really embody that."

Over the four episodes, the Greeblings and their allies will chase Sidious as he tries to undo the universe for good. Luckily, some OG character actors are back to embrace the insanity, including Mark Hamill's laid-back Luke. "One of the things he really enjoyed about *Rebuild The Galaxy* is it's a different flavour of Luke," Hernandez says. "For all of the actors in *Rebuild*, especially the ones who had been long time actors of certain characters, it was fun.

"It was fun for Ahmed to finally get loose as Dark Jar Jar, or Sam Witwer as Maul. Anthony Daniels told us he'd always wanted to be a more roguish C-3PO, so he just went all out and came up with a lot of great material that we didn't write, or he improved. We really gave everyone in the show a licence to go for it!"

Lego Star Wars: Rebuild The Galaxy – Pieces Of The Past is on Disney+ from 19 September.

Solitus (Dan Stevens) has two lightsabers with *chains*.

SCI-FACT! **Billy Dee Williams returns to voice Lando Calrissian/The Mandalorian mash-up The Landolorian.**

The Seventh Doctor with his ace assistant.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Forever Young

One of **Doctor Who**'s most mysterious unmade adventures is revived on audio WORDS: **WILL SALMON**

DOCTOR WHO'S LONG history is full of paths not taken – stories that were planned but, for whatever reason, never made it as far as filming. Over the last 16 years, audio drama publisher Big Finish has been steadily adapting these as part of its Lost Stories strand. This September, Big Finish is turning its attention to "Alixion", one of the most mysterious of all the show's unproduced adventures.

Penned by screenwriter Robin Mukherjee, "Alixion" would have formed part of the classic show's 27th season and was intended to star Sylvester McCoy as the Seventh Doctor and Sophie Aldred as Ace. "The idea was a few pages of outline, really," Mukherjee tells Red Alert. "We were getting there, and we were confident, but it wasn't a fully detailed scene-by-scene."

Alas, plans for Season 27 were abandoned, and *Doctor Who* entered its lengthy "wilderness years". Losing the opportunity to write for the show was a blow for the young writer, but Mukherjee moved on to other projects. "Andrew Cartmel [*Doctor Who*'s then-script editor] became script editor on *Casualty*, and I followed him to that. My first episode worked really well, so I did more, and then got other TV gigs."

Still, nothing is ever truly forgotten when it comes to *Doctor Who*. Now, following an out-of-the-blue email from Big Finish, Mukherjee has been given the chance to flesh out "Alixion" and transform it into a full-cast audio drama, starring both McCoy and Aldred as originally intended.

"The opening is that the Doctor and Ace have just had a really big adventure," says Mukherjee, setting the scene. "And it's been horrible. The Doctor says, 'I fancy a little bit of R&R'." The two settle on a futuristic health spa, but the Time Lord is suspicious when

Big Finish is getting the band back together.

Sophie Aldred penned a *Doctor Who* novel in 2020.

> **I liked taking the Doctor to the point of an existential crisis**

he learns that everyone there is taking an elixir which offers rejuvenating properties. "At the buffet, this chap comes up and says, 'You didn't drink the elixir', and the Doctor says, 'Neither did you.' He may be on holiday, but he keeps his eyes open! Then the guy says, 'I'm here because my daughter came here and vanished. All I got was a message asking for help'. And, bing! Are we not now in *Doctor Who* territory?"

At the heart of the story is the notion of pushing the Time Lord to his limits. "I liked the idea of taking the Doctor to the point of an existential crisis. I felt that it would be interesting to pit him against an opponent who really was his match and actually make him question his identity and raison d'être." That villain is the mysterious Queen of the Hive, which Big Finish's official blurb for the story reveals will force "the Doctor and Ace to confront their deepest fears".

Although the new version of "Alixion" – a name chosen in part because it sounds a little like "elixir" – is very much the same story planned in the late '80s, a few things have changed in the 35 years since it was first conceived – not least its expansion from a three-parter to four full episodes. "We wondered what to do with that extra half hour," Mukherjee says. "There was some talk of maybe doing just a standalone piece, but I felt there was a whole strand of the story that we could expand, and it actually grew into the major foundation of the narrative." Other things changed thanks to the limitless production values that come with the audio medium. "I can do so much more with this than I could with the budgets that were there for *Doctor Who* on TV back then. Audio opened up all of those possibilities."

One aspect of the story that has been discussed over the years is a fan rumour that "Alixion" was, at one point, considered as a potential regeneration story for Sylvester McCoy. Mukherjee is less certain on that. "There was a point when I was considered to write the 25th anniversary," he explains. "But the project wasn't yet quite ready, and Kevin Clarke did a brilliant 25th anniversary story instead ["Silver Nemesis" from season 25]. But no, I'm not sure 'Alixion' was ever meant to be a regeneration story."

As for the writer, with his long-awaited *Doctor Who* debut now finally under his belt, is he tempted to return to the TARDIS for another trip? "I've had a couple of ideas," he teases. "I was thinking perhaps folk horror... I might tap on the door after I've had a little think. I don't know if it's because those early days created this kind of unfulfilled *Doctor Who* writer in me, but I like how the imagination can fly so widely. It's a great show!"

Doctor Who: The Lost Stories – Alixion is out in September on download and limited edition CD.

SCI-FACT! **Season 27 was planned to be Sylvester McCoy's final year as the Doctor, with Richard Griffiths eyed up as his replacement.**

SCI-FACT! **Instead of numerous editorial footnotes, there'll be text pages at the end of each issue, as "it'd be criminal to cover up the stunning art".**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

War Games

New *Secret Wars* miniseries **Battleworld** draws on different timelines

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

POISED TO BE THE LOCATION OF next year's *Avengers: Doomsday*, Battleworld is taking centre stage in a new miniseries, set in an iteration of the patchwork planet that's drawn from various different timelines.

"Some were included just because they're cool, like Killraven's *War Of The Worlds* future when the Martians have conquered Earth," writer Christos Gage tells Red Alert. "Others are there because of the characters we wanted to use, so with Days Of Future Past Storm, we get the Days Of Future Past New York and Sentinels."

Starting with one of his personal favourite characters, Hank Pym, Gage has assembled a band of disparate heroes including a fugitive Luke Cage, a recently sober Carol Danvers and King Thor, who rules over a dead future Earth, and has also included characters from the long defunct New Universe and Crossgen universes.

"That delighted me because the original Star Brand fits perfectly into the story, and because I bought those books 40 years ago," he says. "As for Crossgen, look for at least Giselle from *Mystic* to appear – but the real question is, could I stop at

One of the variant covers for issue one, by Greg Land.

just one of them?" Rather than the Beyonder or Doctor Doom, the heroes are pitted against the seemingly omnipotent but hopelessly vain Michael Korvac. "He fits nicely as the mastermind behind this Battleworld for many reasons, some of which become clear as the story goes on," teases Gage. "He has the cosmic power to do it, and he has history with the Avengers. He's also not so all-powerful that the idea of beating him is inconceivable.

"As for the original *Secret Wars* Big Bads, the Absorbing Man and Titania show up as a callback to the original series. Another fun nod to the past is the debut of a new Venom in a red and blue costume who – just as the original symbiote costume first appeared in *Secret Wars* issue eight, then *Amazing Spider-Man* issue 252 – will debut in *Battleworld* issue three in a brief cameo before making his first full-issue appearance in *Venom* issue 252 soon afterward."

Apart from the original 1984 12-parter and its numerous sequels, Gage also references Jonathan Hickman and Esad Ribic's 2015 series and Tom Defalco and Patrick Olliffe's 2023 retro series *Marvel Super Heroes Secret Wars: Battleworld*.

"The events of all of those books inform the characters who went through them," explains Gage. "Thor, Wasp and others were in the original *Secret Wars*, Hank Pym was in the *Beyond!* miniseries, and several characters dimly recall the 2015 version, so they have all that experience to draw on."

Stating "he's terrific at both big, hectic action scenes and small, personal moments," Gage is impressed by artist Marcus To. "The emotional beats hit as hard as the Sentinels' fists and energy blasts and sometimes both at the same time," he says. "When we've had cast of thousands scenes full of characters, not only has Marcus not strangled me for suggesting a slew of obscure villains, he went ahead and added more!"

Battleworld is out on 24 September.

Eric (Alan Calton) is in deep water. (Sorry.)

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Time And Tide

The sea brings in otherworldly secrets in **The Drowned**

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

"I WANTED THE AUDIENCE ON their toes," says Samuel Clemens, whose debut feature *The Drowned* gives a hauntingly offbeat twist to the crime thriller genre.

"I thought, 'I want to be a film director. I've got to make a mark.' I didn't want to be lost among lots of other movies. As a debut I knew that if I spelled everything out, if I did it as a linear movie, then it might be a good movie but it might just disappear. So there was a conscious decision to do something that left the audience with a real ambiguity, discussing what this or that means.

"I just wanted to make something where maybe an image would stay with you, and you might tell someone, 'Oh, there's this film I saw...'"

Inspired by Clemens's lifelong love of Greek mythology – from classical studies at school to the stop-motion swashbucklers of Ray Harryhausen – *The Drowned* finds three men convening at an isolated coastal retreat after an audacious art heist.

Soon the bickering thieves begin to experience such uncanny phenomena as inexplicable time-slips and visions of blood boiling in buckets. Tensions rise even further with the arrival of three young women who claim to be survivors of a wreck, only to prove a far stranger, more unnerving presence.

"I wanted them to be alluring," Clemens tells Red Alert of these unexpected visitors from the water's edge. "I wanted them to be enticing, sexy and dangerous, but also have a level of innocence in there as well. By starting their story with enormous vulnerability you're in a good place to then start twisting that around a little bit."

Key to the whole tale is the stolen painting itself, John William Waterhouse's 1896 masterpiece Hylas And The Nymphs. *The Waterhouse* was the film's original title, in fact.

"There's a version of that painting in my mum's bathroom. It's inset in a mirror and it's been staring me in the face for 40 years! I was thinking about what they could have stolen and I went into the bathroom and it was honestly like I'd been hit with a sledgehammer. It's here! And it's thematically connected to the film!"

Equally crucial was the choice of location for the beachside house. "It's in Suffolk," says Clemens. "One of the actors, Dominic [Vulliamy], his family own a part of that house. He'd stayed there as a kid, and he found it unsettling. He always thought it was haunted or something. I thought, 'Great! Let's go and have a look at that!'"

A gift for genre storytelling might just be in Clemens's blood. His father was Brian Clemens, creative powerhouse behind such TV classics as *Thriller*, *The Avengers* and *The Professionals*. "I'm happy to be influenced by him but also take his ideas further, or subvert them, because that's what he'd have done. He was always trying to be ahead of the curve."

The Drowned is released on digital platforms from 6 October.

SCI-FACT! **The house in *The Drowned* also appears in 2019's *Yesterday* as the home of John Lennon.**

Sam Walker (Kate Mara): back to Earth... maybe?

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Unsafe Space

How **The Astronaut** is bringing the fear of alien contact home

WORDS: **MATT MAYTUM**

WHILE *THE ASTRONAUT* – JESS Varley's first feature as a solo writer/director – falls definitively into science fiction territory, the idea it sprang from was very much grounded in fact. "It was initially born out of an article about all of the real symptoms that astronauts experience when they come back from space," Varley tells Red Alert. "I just thought it was such an interesting idea that an astronaut can't trust themselves when they return from space because they're hallucinating, they're getting all sorts of symptoms. So I did a springboard off that."

The pitch for Varley's sci-fi thriller takes a familiar concept but rehomes it somewhere unique. *The Astronaut* stars Kate Mara as Sam Walker, who's just returned from her first space mission. After being retrieved from her landing capsule in the ocean, she's debriefed and taken to quarantine at a safe house, under the watchful eye of her NASA superiors and her adopted dad, Laurence Fishburne's General Mark Harris.

While Sam initially experiences some standard-issue symptoms – seeing everyday objects float as her body readjusts to Earth's gravity – she quickly begins to fear that something extraterrestrial may have stowed away with her on the return journey, and mysterious goings-on in the house and the surrounding woods do nothing to quell her anxieties.

"*Black Swan* is a huge inspiration for the movie," explains Varley. "Natalie Portman's performance in that is incredible, and Kate is amazing in this. [And there's] that sort of psychological struggle of what's real, what's not real, going through bodily changes as a metaphor for how painful and awkward and messy growth can be in real life, and trying to use some of that body horror as a way to explore those very real-life themes."

Mara has to carry much of the film on her own – "either opposite a tennis ball or nothing at all", as Varley explains – and is put through the wringer both physically and emotionally. "What's so fun about Kate in this movie is

> **"The team and I drew a lot of inspiration from bioluminescent sea creatures"**

There's having CCTV and there's being paranoid...

Laurence Fishburne as General Harris (standing).

Ground control to Major Walker: don't look now.

Kate Mara essentially carries the whole film.

really seeing her unravel and lean into the messiness," says Varley. "Just to really see her go through every emotion on the spectrum is so gripping."

Varley's awe at pulling this ambitious project together with a talented bunch of collaborators is infectious, and she also beams about having *the* Morpheus on board as a stern authority figure. "It's so funny because we originally were talking about Mr Fishburne as an archetype for the type of actor we would dream of having in the role, not imagining for a second that he would ever actually consider not only a very small independent film but also my first film on my own as a writer/director," she says.

Another fortuitous find? The high-tech isolated house they shot in, which was actually in Ireland. "We really lucked out with the house," she says. "They had never had anyone film in it before, which is very rare. The homeowners were so gracious to let us come in and really just essentially completely redo their home... But it really was a very serendipitous find, the house itself looked so much like the house I had used in my deck." The sleek home of Oscar Isaac's tech CEO in *Ex Machina* was also an inspiration.

Without delving too far into spoiler territory, there was also a reality-grounded inspiration to the film's extraterrestrial creature design. "With everything in the film, I always tried to really root it in nature so that it never felt so science fiction that it was unrelatable," explains Varley. "So the team and I drew a lot of inspiration from bioluminescent sea creatures, and really everything in the film is – even though it gets a little bit trippy and a little bit out there and stylised – a callback to real-life nature."

The Astronaut is an ambitious genre blend. As well as the aforementioned sci-thriller and body-horror elements, there's also family drama (Sam feels adrift from her estranged husband and co-parent Mark, played by Gabriel Luna), and home-invasion scares. There are also shades of *A Quiet Place*, but the film goes to some surprising places, with Varley throwing back to Spielberg classics *ET* and *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*.

"To me, [*The Astronaut*] is really about self-discovery, and I think using genre as a way to explore that, and maybe turning the audience's expectations upside down a little bit at the end, is definitely something that is a little bit of a throwback," says Varley.

"Something that I, as an audience member, really miss and was trying to really tap into was some of that heartwarming element, so it wasn't purely horror, but it definitely has a lot of scares and it's a fun roller coaster ride."

The Astronaut is released digitally on 22 September and on Blu-ray/DVD in October.

SCI-FACT! **Kate Mara played Invisible Woman Sue Storm in 2015's *Fantastic Four*, and also briefly appeared in *Iron Man 2*.**

SCI-FACT! ***Black Lotus*** **takes place between the events of the 2017 shorts "Black Out 2022" and "2036: Nexus Dawn".**

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Sin City

Blade Runner heads to Las Vegas in new miniseries

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

CONTINUING THE STORY OF 2021'S *Blade Runner: Black Lotus*, Titan Comics' latest miniseries sees renegade Replicant combat model Elle – the notorious Black Lotus Killer – leaving the City of Angels far behind, as she fetches up in Sin City. Picking up "no more than a couple of weeks" after the events of 2022's *Leaving LA* – according to writer Nancy A Collins – Las Vegas sees one of the characters from the previous four-parter returning to "join the Doll Squad that's hunting her down".

It's set in 2032 – around halfway between the 2019 milieu of Ridley Scott's original 1982 film and Denis Villeneuve's 2017 sequel *Blade Runner 2049* – and Collins has perhaps been afforded more creative freedom than the authors of Titan's other *Blade Runner* titles. "I've been allowed a certain amount of leeway with the stories since they're part of the anime series and not the movie franchise itself," she says. "*Black Lotus* is a bit more action-oriented because of its anime origins as well as the fact the main protagonist, Elle, isn't a Blade Runner but a Replicant."

While Elle's mysterious past and her "desire to understand her origins" are touched on, Las Vegas is more about her attempts to fit in with other Replicants. "I'm providing a glimpse of what kind of society Replicants might reate for themselves without humans being involved," explains Collins, who after including Pleasure Models in *Leaving LA*, highlights other types of Replicants in this series.

"I'll be introducing the Hospitality Models, which are cosplay-type Replicants created for the popular theme hotels to entertain and host the human tourists," she adds. "You have Replicants acting as Roman centurions, gladiators and Emperors, or Egyptian pharaohs and queens, even medieval knights, carnival acrobats, circus clowns, cowboys and the odd Elvis impersonator, of course. They were all left behind when the city was abandoned due to radiation, but still take their roles seriously."

Blade Runner 2049 concluded with Ryan Gosling's K confronting Deckard in a ruined casino, and we can expect some references to it. "There will be some hints of what's to come," teases Collins. "And since I've been to Las Vegas a few times, there will also be some nods to the city's real life history as well."

With the younger, recently blinded Niander Wallace "continuing to be a driving force in the storyline", Collins will also be throwing in a few other familiar faces. "Another character from the original anime I've brought back is Officer Alani Davis, who was seriously wounded by the White Lily Replicant that Niander created to kill the Black Lotus," she adds. "I'm also introducing a character related to someone who Elle killed in the anime. That person wants revenge more than Niander wants Elle's head, so there's a bit of conflict there for all concerned."

Collins is full of praise for the work of artist Jesús Hervás. "Jesús brings energy and dynamism to the storytelling," she says. "He's great with action and excels at depicting scenes on mammoth scale, such as the Tyrell Ziggurat in LA and the desolated casinos of Vegas."

Blade Runner: Black Lotus – Las Vegas is out on 17 September.

Overlooking Las Vegas on a variant cover.

Johnny Depp is in talks for a rum-soaked return to the *Pirates Of The Caribbean* saga. "If he likes the way the part's written, I think he would do it," says producer **Jerry Bruckheimer.** "We are still working on a screenplay."

Stranger Things star **Finn Wolfhard** claims that the spin-off series will be "sort of an anthology... I think set in different places and all tied together through this mythology of the Upside Down."

NEWSWARP
Breaking Genre News!

The name's Knight, Steven Knight... The man behind *Peaky Blinders* and *SAS: Rogue Heroes* will write the next **James Bond** movie, 007's first mission for new spymasters Amazon.

Matt Smith is heading for that galaxy far, far away... He's set to play one of the villains in **Shawn Levy**'s *Star Wars: Starfighter*.

Star Trek: Picard's **Orla Brady** replaces **Kerry Condon** as the voice of **AI FRIDAY** in Marvel's *Vision Quest*.

Kristen Wiig will voice **Roboto** in the live-action *Masters Of The Universe* movie, due for release 5 June 2026.

Disney+ has greenlit *Coven Academy*, following the adventures of a group of young witches in New Orleans. It's created by **Tim Federle** from *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series*.

One Piece has been renewed for a third season.

Zach Cregger is discussing a prequel to *Weapons* that would explore the origins of **Aunt Gladys**.

The fifth *Shrek* has been bumped to 30 June 2027.

Resident Alien has been cancelled after four seasons.

Ryan Reynolds is bringing the motormouthed merc back to the MCU – **Deadpool** is confirmed to appear in *Avengers: Doomsday*.

The Walking Dead: Daryl Dixon has been renewed for a fourth and final season.

James Gunn confirms that he's "already finished the treatment for the next story in what I'll call the **Superman** saga... I'm hopefully going into production on that not too far away from today."

Merrin Dungey, **Audrey Hsieh** and **Audrey Grace Marshall** join the pilot for the rebooted *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*. *Eternals*' **Chloé Zhao** directs.

Original *Scary Movie* stars **Regina Hall** and **Anna Faris** will reprise **Brenda** and **Cindy** for the next entry in the horror-spoofing franchise. The Wayans Bros are set to write and produce.

Legendary arcade zap-'em-up *Space Invaders* is heading to the big screen, produced by *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds*' **Akiva Goldsman**.

Sebastian Stan is to star in a new take on *Frankenstein*, directed by **Radu Jude**.

Goosebumps has been cancelled after two seasons on Disney+.

Dave Bautista is in the frame for villainous immortal **the Kurgan** in the *Highlander* remake. **Clancy Brown** played the priest-licking original in 1986.

Ana Nogueira, writer of the upcoming *Supergirl* movie, will also lasso the new DCU **Wonder Woman** to the screen.

Sony Pictures Animation is reportedly developing a **Spider-Punk** movie, co-written by **Daniel Kaluuya**, who voiced the dreadlocked multiversal variant in 2023's *Across The Spider-Verse*.

Wednesday has been renewed for a third season. Click-click...

Marc Ruffalo is back as the Hulk in *Spider-Man: Brand New Day* alongside **Jon Bernthal** as the Punisher and **Michael Mando** as **Mac Gargan**, aka the **Scorpion**.

PICTURES: © DISNEY, NETFLIX, MARVEL, AMC

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Stand To Detention

Red Dwarf producer **Doug Naylor** stays behind after school for new book

WORDS: **RICHARD EDWARDS**

AFTER MORE THAN 30 YEARS shepherding the deep space adventures of Dave Lister, Arnold Rimmer, Kryten and the Cat, *Red Dwarf* co-creator Doug Naylor is coming back down to Earth.

In his debut kids' novel *Sin Bin Island*, the students of a very odd boarding school are kept on the straight and narrow via unconventional means – namely the threat of a stay on the spooky, mod-cons-free landmass of the title.

"It's very much based on my feelings about the school I went to," Naylor tells Red Alert. "It was quite scary for me when I attended at seven, and we did have things like baronial halls and refectories, day boys and boarders. Of course, the book's highly exaggerated, but I felt the kids would have more of a journey to go on if the school had this restrictive regime they'd have to navigate their way around."

Sin Bin Island isn't, however, a realistic, warts-and-all critique of the education system. Over the course of the novel, the recently orphaned Digs has to get to grips with eccentric, unreasonable teachers, a legacy of smuggling, and – thanks to the interventions of a strangely prescient Russian doll – magic. Not that life at Cyril Sniggs's Correctional Orphanage For Wayward Boys And Girls is a wand-waving free-for-all.

"I think the best magic has to have rules," says Naylor. "Once you've set up the rules you're able to solve problems, but magic never solves the huge problems. And some of the ideas in the book are quite science-fictiony – there's a [magic] stone that reduces things back to their original state, horse manure to hay, for example. Using that was quite fun and felt quite *Red Dwarf*-y in some ways."

Although Naylor has substituted deep space for a freaky island, the long-running sitcom has influenced the book in several ways. "There's a core gang of four kids," he explains. "I deliberately did a gang of four because we discovered on *Red Dwarf* that you can split them up into two twos, and that's really helpful.

"The four kids are quite unusual in that they're nicely neurotic, if that's the right phrase. They're orphans, they have secrets and really interesting backstories that come out over what I think is going to be a series [of books]."

Fans of the boys from the Dwarf will also be happy to see that Naylor's knack for constructing imaginative similes and metaphors is alive and well. He says they come to him at unexpected times.

"There's a line about a character's eyebrows, where it says it looks like a fairy's done the splits on her forehead. I was on a plane looking at someone who looked like that, and I thought, 'How would you describe those eyebrows? They're amazing eyebrows!' Equally, there's one about a nose, which starts off straight and then looks lost. That was based on [footballer] Steve Bruce's nose!"

Sin Bin Island is published by David Fickling Books on 11 September.

Doug Naylor on the set of "The Promised Land".

RED DWARF © GRANT NAYLOR PRODUCTIONS/BABY COW/BBC/DAVE

Will we see the beings from Red Dwarf again?

STATUS LEAK

When will we see new episodes of *Red Dwarf*?

It's been five years since the boys from the Dwarf ran into Cat's felis sapien brethren in 2020 special "The Promised Land". While that's small fry next to the decade that elapsed between *Red Dwarf VIII* and *Back To Earth*, another trip to the small rouge one is starting to feel overdue.

Unfortunately, despite persistent online rumours about the show's return, *Red Dwarf* is currently stuck in stasis – though Naylor says it's not for the want of trying.

Following the success of "The Promised Land", UKTV (owners of Dave) asked Naylor to write a new special back in 2023. "I was about probably two-thirds of the way through the screenplay, and then I got an email saying can we have a Zoom tomorrow, we've got some difficult news to share with you," he recalls. "The difficult news was they'd had a change [of strategy] and were no longer commissioning scripted comedy, so they didn't want it any more. It was *a little bit annoying*.

"I'll turn that into a novel some day," he adds, "but as far as *Red Dwarf* is concerned, we need someone to commission it. So, whether it's the BBC or Netflix or Apple, whatever, we're here and we'd love to do more."

We may see Chris Barrie, Craig Charles, Danny John-Jules and Robert Llewellyn reunited a little sooner, however, in a project that has seemingly has (future?) echoes of Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon in *The Trip*, and David Tennant and Michael Sheen in *Staged*.

"I wrote a screenplay back in Covid times, which was the *Red Dwarf* cast playing fictitious versions of themselves," says Naylor. "They're not a million miles away from their *Red Dwarf* characters, and there's real interest in that. There's a production company involved, there's a distributor involved, and we're hoping to do something in the next year or two."

Naylor yuks it up with cast and crew on the special.

SCI-FACT! **A Blu-ray box set featuring every *Red Dwarf* episode to date is out on 6 October. Naylor says it won't include any new bonuses.**

SCI-FACT! ***Powers*** **was adapted for television by Sony's Playstation Network; the series ran for two seasons between 2015 and 2016.**

A variant cover by artist David Mack.

Deena Pilgrim (centre) is now a captain.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Police Special

Powers returns to its street level roots for its 25th anniversary WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

WITH WRITER BRIAN MICHAEL Bendis insisting he didn't want to do "a greatest hits package, the sort of thing you'd obviously do for an anniversary", *Powers 25* – his new monthly with artist Michael Avon Oeming, marking the two and a half decades since the series (whose home is now at Dark Horse) was first published – is no nostalgic celebration. Instead, the opening 12-parter introduces a new central protagonist in Detective Iris Kutter.

"We're an independent comic which, like an independent film, is all about what chances, what dares, you take as a creative person," Bendis tells Red Alert. "Powers is a book about homicide detectives charged with solving crimes revolving around powers. We've built this wonderful machine where we get to explore genres by mashing them together, and because of the structure of it we can go off in all sorts of different directions, such as mythological, cosmic or really grimy."

With her father having been a rookie cop who "very famously lost his head on camera for all the world to see in one of those horrible TMZ-style videos", Kutter's name will be familiar to *Powers* readers. "Those videos never go away and are like a trauma you can't get past, and here she is trying to walk in a version of his shoes," says Bendis. "And the only person that's honest with her about that is Deena Pilgrim."

Having returned to the Powers Division at the conclusion of 2020 graphic novel *The Best Ever*, erstwhile lead character Deena Pilgrim (now a captain) acts as a mentor figure for Kutter. "It's very rare to have your characters age along with the time they've been published," says Bendis. "Deena realised that she really had nowhere else to go, but she has the knowledge to help the next generation, so she serves a purpose even though she's just a closet full of ghosts and skeletons."

While Deena's former foil Christian Walker was a hero who lost his

Iris Cutter's father met a famously grisly end.

abilities before becoming a detective, Kutter's new partner Moebius Moon is the first active Power to join the Powers Division. "That allows him a unique experience," adds Bendis. "We'll see why he's so eager to become a Powers detective even though he was told that door wasn't open to him, and as we'll discover, Moebius also has a history with Deena and Walker and the Powers Division."

With the emphasis placed firmly on the experiences of the lowly police officers and not the otherworldly superhumans caught up in the crimes they investigate, *Powers 25* harks back to the original series' street-level milieu. "We have very strict rules about how we tell stories and, most importantly, from what perspective they're told," explains Bendis. "We always stay with the cops, but if we break the rules, we break them in the most exciting way possible. For the first year of Powers, we stayed on the ground and if the superhero flew away we didn't go with them. But when Calista, the second Retro Girl, became a lead character, it was more from her perspective. But now we're back on the ground and there's a body in the gutter..."

Powers 25 is out on 10 September.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Fighting Spirit

Ahead of Duncan Jones's movie, his comic co-writer Alex de Campi is telling **Rogue Trooper's** secret origin

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

AFTER CO-WRITING 2021 graphic novel *Madi: Once Upon A Time In The Future* with *Rogue Trooper* director Duncan Jones, Alex de Campi is now teaming up with artist Neil Edwards on the Genetic Infantryman's latest series in the Galaxy's Greatest Comic. Perhaps unsurprisingly given their past connection to Jones, "Ghost Patrol" – which begins in prog 2450's bumper jump-on issue of *2000 AD* – boasts a few sneaky links to next year's blockbuster film.

"I was lucky enough to see an early assemblage of the film and I'm telling you now – it rules!" de Campi tells Red Alert. "My storyline is intended as a companion to the film but you're not going to spoil yourself if you read it before seeing the film, or vice versa. There's at least one Easter egg for the film, but it's kind of obscure and tangential."

According to Edwards, "the timeline jumps from past to present and goes on a real wild journey", as "Ghost Patrol" delves into the hidden history of the GIs. "It works on two levels," explains de Campi. "For newbies, it's chapter one. For the Squaxx dek Thargo, it weaves a ton of classic Rogue Trooper stories, either showing them from new perspectives or just sneaking in fun references. But there are lots of new characters and new big widescreen action adventures too."

Though she refuses to reveal if any previous adversaries such as the Traitor General are involved, de Campi does confirm that Rogue's trusted Biochips are all present and correct. "You can't have a Rogue Trooper story without Helm, Gunnar and Bagman, who I especially love writing," she says. "They're a huge part of 'Ghost Patrol' and they each get some big character moments. As for Rogue's rogues' gallery, we're definitely going to see some old favourites make guest appearances."

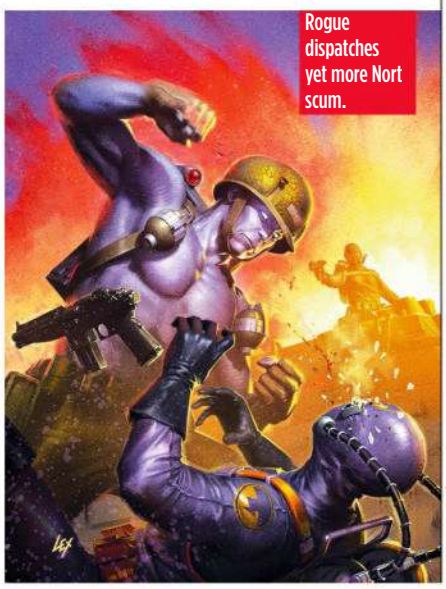
First appearing in 1981's prog 228, *Rogue Trooper* was co-created by writer Gerry Finley-Day and artist Dave Gibbons, whose work has been a huge inspiration to Edwards. "I've collected *2000 AD* for years, so I'm very familiar with Rogue from the initial classic debut in 1982 and the relaunch in 1989," he says. "Dave Gibbons's visuals and character designs were amazing and I couldn't get enough of anything sci-fi."

Although he respects Gibbons's visual legacy and that of the various artists that succeeded him (including Cam Kennedy, Steve Dillon, Colin Wilson and Will Simpson) Edwards has attempted to distance his work on "Ghost Patrol" from their respective oeuvres. "I've gone for a widescreen approach as I love drawing big action," he continues. "For Rogue himself, I want to give him a bit of bulk to his frame as he's tall, about 6' 4"/6' 6", so he's larger than life and looks like he can physically take on a tank."

With Edwards asserting "'Ghost Patrol' is self-contained but it could easily lead to new stories", both he and de Campi would welcome the return of Rogue Trooper. "'Ghost Patrol' has a very conclusive end but we could always weave out new stories," says de Campi. "Nu Earth is a big place – things happen there!"

2000 AD prog 2450 is out on 17 September.

> **"You can't have a Rogue Trooper story without Helm, Gunnar and Bagman"**



Rogue dispatches yet more Nort scum.

SCI-FACT! **Prog 2450 also features the return of streampunk fantasy series *Brass Sun*, and a new storyline for Judge Dredd.**

CREATIVES INTERVIEW

The Beautiful People

Seth Reiss reveals all about the fantastical **A Big Bold Beautiful Journey**

WORDS: **STEVE O'BRIEN**

ASK MOST SCREENWRITERS about their latest movie and they'll rarely say the idea arrived fully formed. Yet for Seth Reiss, he remembers distinctly the moment he came up with the concept for his newest film.

"I was on Interstate 95 in a rental car," he recalls, "and I was very depressed and in need of something, and then I was like, 'What if the GPS said, 'Would you like to go on a big, bold, beautiful journey?'"

Those exact words would come to title Reiss's follow-up to 2022's deliciously black satire *The Menu*. Despite arising from one of the lowest points in the writer's life, *A Big Bold Beautiful Journey* is a radiant, life-affirming blast of positivity, at a time where that seems to be exactly what we need.

Best described as a romantic fantasy, the film is, in Reiss's words, "about two people who are given this opportunity to revisit their past and the events that have shaped who they are, in order to make a different choice about their lives and how they go forward. It's about getting to know a person you might be in a relationship with and really getting to know them and them really getting to know you."

Colin Farrell and Margot Robbie headline as the single strangers who, after meeting at a friend's wedding, go on a "big bold beautiful journey" together, one that transports them to pivotal moments in their respective pasts. As the trailer reveals, the characters make every trip through a free-standing door, but as originally written, that gateway was a whole building. Reiss credits the mononymous director Kogonada for coming up with this simplified idea.

"These buildings that were off the beaten path, that was going to look weird," he says, "but his idea to just make them doors, I love that so much. I knew then I was in really good creative hands."

Arthouse favourite Kogonada signed on after the script found its way into his hands. As the director of indie films such as *Columbus* (2017) and *After Yang* (2021), he seemed a natural fit for a screenplay that Reiss says was influenced

Colin Farrell, Margot Robbie and director Kogonada.

David and Sarah get to have many *Sliding Doors* moments.

"Looks innocuous enough... you first."

by the likes of Charlie Kaufman and director/actor Albert Brooks.

"I was blown away by *Columbus* and *After Yang*," the writer enthuses. "I wanted this movie to be beautiful and classy, and I knew that's what he would bring to it. I knew he would bring his taste and his sensibility to the film – he makes bold choices that had I had those same thoughts, I would have written them, so it made for a really good partnership, especially when we were really digging into the script together."

Reiss says he didn't have any actors in mind when he was writing the screenplay, but was overjoyed when Farrell and Robbie came on board.

"Kogonada had a relationship with Colin [Farrell starred in the SF drama *After Yang*] and wanted to go with him, which was great, but we had to make the character a little older than I initially conceived it. Then Margo heard about the movie and knew that Colin was attached, read the script and agreed to do it, which was so exciting."

"Colin Farrell is playing a sort of less handsome version of myself"

A Big Bold Beautiful Journey is Reiss's first solo screenwriting credit (*The Menu* was penned with his friend Will Tracy) and he confesses it's a deeply personal film, one that wouldn't have worked with a co-writer.

"I would say that Colin Farrell is playing a sort of less handsome version of myself," he laughs. "But this is the story I wanted to tell and I've always wanted to do personal movies, that's the kind of writing I like."

Reiss admits he doesn't really think in terms of genre ("I don't think I'm very good at it," he says, "what I am good at is a premise that evokes the human condition"), so finds it hard to describe his next two projects, *42.6 Years* and *Five*. He can only say that the former is "more in line with this one" and that the latter is "a little darker".

"God bless the studio for feeling that the story itself and the way it's executed is exciting enough to overcome the lack of genre," he explains. "In a trailer, like the one we have for *A Big Bold Beautiful Journey*, if you can hit what the premise is, then I think the genre question goes out the window."

That trailer promises something magical, heartfelt and visually ravishing, and Reiss confirms that, yes, it's an accurate representation of the finished movie.

"Yeah, it's pretty evocative," he says proudly. "It's saying, this is going to take you on an emotional roller coaster and that it's beautifully cinematic and fantastical, so that's really exciting!"

A Big Bold Beautiful Journey is in cinemas from 19 September.

SCI-FACT! **Seth Reiss cut his creative teeth on TV, as one of the head writers on the popular talk show *Late Night With Seth Meyers*.**

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Fairy Tale Detectives

A much-loved YA series comes alive in animation for **The Sisters Grimm**

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

IN THE EARLY 2000S, MICHAEL Buckley was working intermittently in television when he came up with the idea for an animated series about two orphaned sisters named Sabrina and Daphne Grimm.

Descendants of the Brothers Grimm, after their parents disappear, the sisters discover from their grandmother Relda that they're destined to manage magical beings known as Everafters. While television execs liked the premise, no one bought the idea, so Buckley ended up selling it as a book. *The Fairy-Tale Detectives*, published in 2005, was the first in what would become nine hugely successful books in YA series The Sisters Grimm.

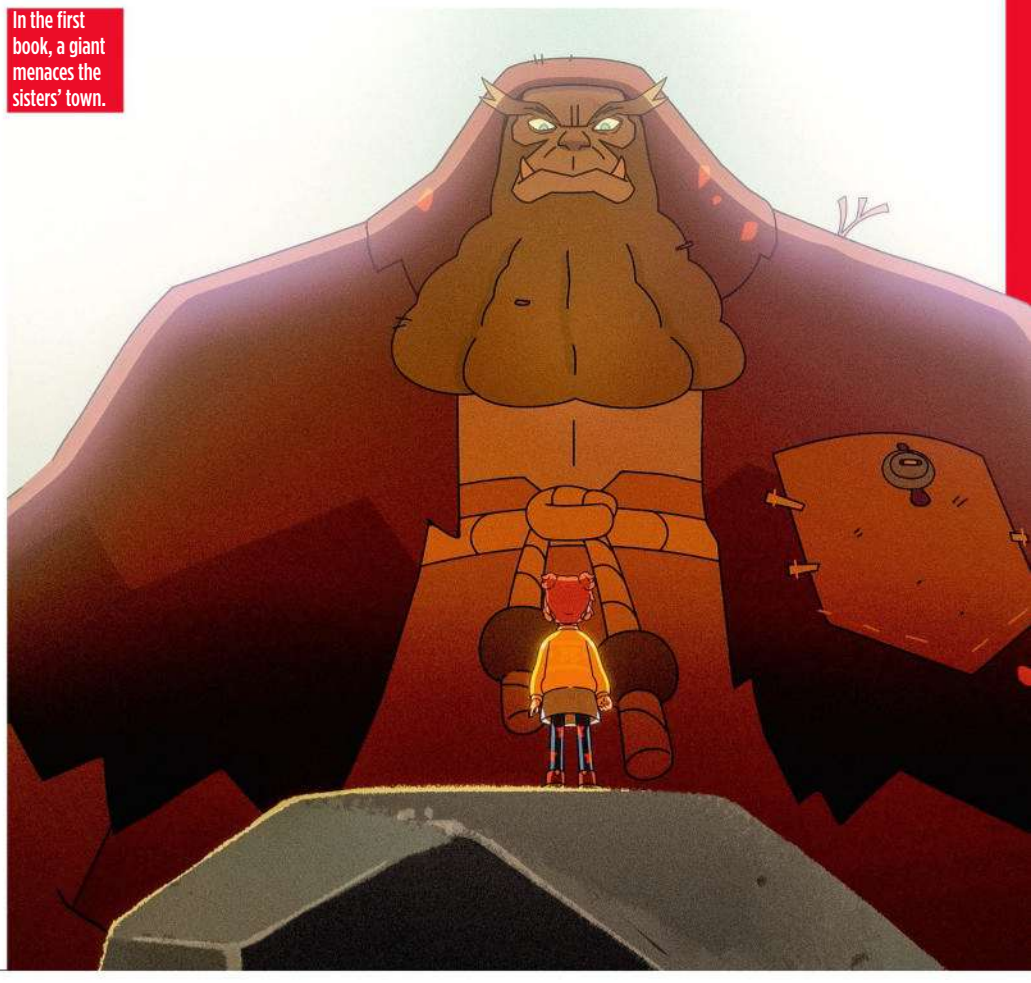
Gen Z kids ate up Buckley's clever mysteries, but the author tells Red Alert that getting the books adapted wasn't easy. "A lot of people just didn't get it, as it's two little girls and an old woman solving mysteries; that's generally not what people are banging on the door for, at least back then," Buckley chuckles.

"I got people saying, 'Could you put vampires in it?' when *Twilight* was really big. Then someone said, 'Could you make them into boys?' I was like, 'You don't even get the title. We've got a real problem.'"

It wasn't until 2023, when producer Theresa Park introduced Buckley to Apple TV+ and showrunner Amy Higgins, that the right adaptation alchemy finally clicked.

Higgins says she had listened to the books with her young son, and the characters immediately sparked her imagination. "Henry, my little boy, was Daphne's age at the time, but I thought Sabrina was this complex character that I hadn't seen before," she says of what hooked her.

"She'd gone through this trauma, and you don't see that in animation, where you have this person who has a lot of anger and complexity to her, yet she's trying to hold it together and protect her little sister. I was like, that's a really interesting character that I



In the first book, a giant menaces the sisters' town.

Sabrina, Daphne and their grandma Relda.

Glow worms? Pixies? You'll have to watch and find out!

wanted to capture the magic of that landscape in 2D animation, carving out a unique visual space from other book series adaptations.

"Everything was important to me," she says of their early series development. "We met about six or seven designers, and the prompt was that we probably don't have the budget for a Studio Ghibli film, but what can we do to get in close to that? Like, the wide shots in *Spirited Away* when they're in the train. I said, 'I want as many of those as we can have.' I sent them all costume charts and background charts and palettes."

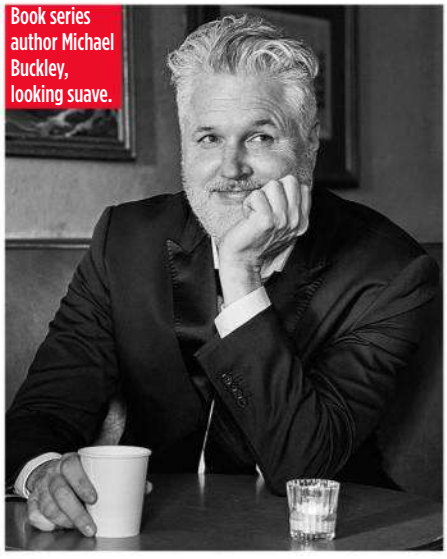
In the end, Higgins reconnected with director Sage Cotugno to lead the storyboard artists and animators at animation studio Titmouse, as they all came together to flesh out a six-episode season of *The Sisters Grimm* based on the first book. "Sage is really phenomenal, and the reason I asked them to come be our director was because of their knowledge of Ghibli and anime that was even deeper than mine."

> **"I didn't want these characters to get watered down"**

Buckley says he's thrilled with the results and hopes that the care taken means the series is received with enthusiasm.

"I didn't write some sacred scroll," he says of accepting the malleability of his stories. "I wrote a story, and I hope that the kids who watch it and read the books recognise it. But I want to see where it goes too. I've been living with this for a long time, so I'm excited about the potential."

The Sisters Grimm is on Apple TV+ from 3 October.



Book series author Michael Buckley, looking suave.

haven't seen, and I *want* to see. And I write comedy and action, so when you add some complex characters in there, say no more!'"

Buckley says he was so grateful that Higgins got his world from the start. "I didn't want these characters to get watered down. It's fun that they're running through this world filled with fairy tale characters, but it's what those fairy tale characters do, and what they represent.

"Also, Sabrina isn't always the most likeable person, and Puck [the Pixie] isn't always the kindest, sweetest person. When you're working in the kids' world, [studios] are afraid to be a little real. But the best kids' books and best characters are always really challenging people. I was just happy that Amy saw that."

Higgins says from the start that she had strong ideas of how she envisioned the locale of imaginary Ferryport Landing in upstate New York. Having grown up in a small town, she

SCI-FACT! **Author Michael Buckley co-created animated series *Robotomy* for Cartoon Network, starring the voice work of Patton Oswald.**

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Clickbait Carnage

Strange Harvest brings true crime documentaries to the horror genre

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

STUART ORTIZ HAD LONG BEEN intrigued by the idea of developing a horror film in the style of a true crime documentary. But for years he kept the concept on the back burner, unsure whether audiences would fully grasp what he was aiming for. That changed in 2020 when Netflix's *Tiger King* became a cultural phenomenon.

"There was a language that now existed," he tells Red Alert. "I felt like, okay, now is the time. This could work, and people could be into this."

The result is *Strange Harvest*, a chilling mockumentary that retraces the San Bernardino Major Crimes Unit's hunt for Mr Shiny, a sadistic serial killer who struck the Inland Empire in the '90s, vanished without trace and reappeared a decade later to continue his brutal spree. Told primarily through interviews with homicide detectives Joseph Kirby (Peter Zizzo) and Alexis Taylor (Terri Apple), the film relies heavily on naturalistic performances, something Ortiz says is "a nuanced and difficult thing to get right".

"You're playing a character," he explains, "but that character is also being made to sit down and do an interview in a situation they might be uncomfortable in, because they're not an actor – they're a detective. It's one of those things where you know it when you see it, and when it's wrong, you immediately pick up on it. The movie rides on the shoulders of those actors. If you don't believe them, it doesn't work." Happily, both Zizzo and Apple deliver entirely convincing performances. "I'm just grateful that I found two really great actors to lean on," says Ortiz.

Opening with a knowingly overblown title sequence, *Strange Harvest* quickly settles into the familiar format of the sensationalist true crime documentaries that have become a staple of Netflix and other streaming platforms. "There's kind of this rhythm to these things," Ortiz notes. "They dial it up to this big moment that gets you sucked in, then they drop it down. I tried to ape that rhythm as best I could. These documentaries are very 'clickbaity'... that's what I want to call it. They try to keep you continuously invested."

For the writer/director, realism was the "absolute North Star". All of the film's

Some of the footage was shot on police body cams.

faux-archive footage was recorded on period-accurate devices, including camcorders, body cameras and surveillance systems. One of its most disturbing sequences plays out through the pixellated feed of a webcam. Ortiz freely admits the picture looks terrible – "which is to say it looks perfectly appropriate for what it's supposed to be: a poorly lit shot that's amateur and lo-fi. When you do that, you gain another level of believability.

"A lot of people talk about that scene as being really uncomfortable," he says. "I think part of that is because the format is just... it's believable. It doesn't seem fake, like in some big-budget movies where a 'webcam' is clearly shot on a pro format with a lens. What you see is what you get."

Any illusion that *Strange Harvest* is a genuine TV documentary is ultimately broken by its graphic imagery – from bloodied crime scene photos to unflinching footage of violent murders. "My aim was to try something that hadn't really been seen before – and to do it without a lot of money," Ortiz explains. "We allocated a disproportionate amount of the budget to the makeup department."

Practical effects were handled by Josh Russell, whose credits include *The Ritual* and *Hellraiser* (2022). "John brought to the table, among other things, some incredibly realistic-looking dummies for a sequence involving a family who have been killed in a horrific way," Ortiz says. "They're Hollywood calibre. You take pictures of them, and they look great. I'm proud of what we achieved."

Lurking at the centre of it all is Mr Shiny, the film's eerie, masked antagonist. "I was interested in having a killer who believes he has some kind of higher purpose; who believes he is hearing visions from a god or some kind of outside intelligence," Ortiz says. He drew inspiration in part from real-life serial killers David Berkowitz (the "Son of Sam") and Herbert Mullin, who believed that if he didn't kill people, earthquakes would destroy California. As the film progresses, it veers into far stranger territory. "There's a cosmic core element – if you like HP Lovecraft, you're probably going to like our mythos," he teases.

"If you like HP Lovecraft, you're probably going to like our mythos"

Strange Harvest has already played at several film festivals. "It's still my favourite thing in the world to go to the very back of the theatre, get down real low and then just watch," Ortiz says. "It's fun because you know when all the jumps are coming; when all the beats and the moments that you want to get a reaction from the audience are coming. "As a filmmaker, and especially as a horror filmmaker, making these kind of movies, you are hoping for that reaction. That is what you work for."

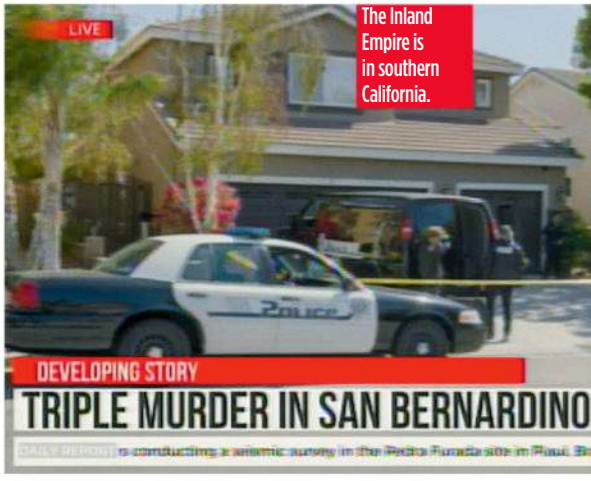
If the interest is there, Ortiz envisions not just a sequel, but a full-blown "Cinematic Universe" of interconnected found-footage mockumentaries. "There's no reason Mr Shiny, the detectives, or any number of side characters couldn't show up in some capacity. I'd love to do that. I've got a million stories."

Strange Harvest is streaming in September.

DEVELOPING STORY
"MR.SHINY" KILLER CLAIMS 9TH VICTIM
DAILY REPORT
magnitude | The Space Shuttle Discovery makes its final landing at the Kennedy

Fake news reports help to maintain the fiction.

Terri Apple plays detective Alexis "Lexi" Taylor.



The Inland Empire is in southern California.

SCI-FACT! **As one half of the Vicious Brothers, Stuart Ortiz co-wrote and co-directed the 2011 cult hit *Grave Encounters* with Colin Minihan.**

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Checking Out

Haunted Hotel's creator on merging horror and comedy for the ultimate dysfunctional sitcom WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

IF YOU'VE EVER STRUGGLED TO get along with a sibling, imagine trying to do it when they're a ghost. That's where writer Matt Roller's imagination went while he was working as a story editor/writer on the hit series *Rick And Morty*. Though he was a big fan of the tone and pace of what his boss Dan Harmon was doing on that adult animated comedy series, Roller tells Red Alert that his heart always drifted towards horror storytelling.

"I watch and read all the horror, so I wanted to build something that's as flexible as *Rick And Morty* in terms of the ability to riff on a genre, just for horror," Roller says of what eventually became his original adult animation series for Netflix, *Haunted Hotel*. Though it's characterised as a horror-comedy, Roller says he really thinks of it as a comedy about horror.

"I wanted to lead with the comedy and just be inspired by the horror," he says. "Ideally, it holds up as comedy and doesn't require you to know about horror to enjoy it. Our intent was never to parody horror. We're not trying to make fun of that genre. We're more embracing it and then running in a funny direction with it."

Boasting a premise as straightforward as its title, *Haunted Hotel* is a dysfunctional family sitcom with an afterlife twist. Single mum Katherine (Eliza Coupe) is bequeathed the Undervale Hotel by her recently deceased brother Nathan (Will Forte), so she attempts to move in and run it with the help of her people-pleaser teen son Ben (Skyler Gisondo) and macabre tween Esther (Natalie Palamides). She also has help from the other side, as Nathan is still haunting the place, and Abaddon (Jimmi Simpson), a demon in a gothic child's body, seems stuck to the property as well.

"The brother and sister is the core emotional story of the show," Roller says of how the stories revolve around these squabbling siblings. "I really like that it's a show about a second chance, and their relationship with each other that they didn't give each other in life for reasons that we've begun to tap into but haven't necessarily fully explored. Nathan can't

Just hanging out at the *Haunted Hotel*.

Will Forte voices brother Nathan.

If you go down to the woods... just turn back.

Eliza Coupe plays Katherine.

"No, it's fine, I'll just deal with this then, shall I?"

leave this place, so they want to make it work. Ben and Esther are there to react to the horrors of the hotel. She always thinks she can take advantage of what's there and use it, not quite for evil, but to her advantage. And Ben is just a shill who will fall for anything that anyone tells him to."

Abaddon functions as the chaos character that has latched onto these humans. "I'm just interested in Abaddon's drive, like what he really wants, because I think he's still discovering it," Roller says of the demon, whose backstory will unfold as the season does. "Something we talked about in the [writers'] room is that emotionally, he's just a toddler, and that lets you tell really interesting stories that could feel shallow if it was with another character."

As the family tries to make the Undervale a functional business, they also have to contend with an infestation of dead souls still hanging around and being annoyingly underfoot all the time.

"A haunted hotel is such a great, classic setting," Roller says of how each room will reveal all kinds of ghostly secrets. "I wanted a hotel that, 80 episodes into [the series], it's still

> **"Our intent was never to parody horror. We're not trying to make fun of that genre"**

believable that there's a room you haven't seen. Same goes for the grounds around the hotel. We don't really say it much canonically but I was just thinking it's in upstate New York, because I grew up in the New England area.

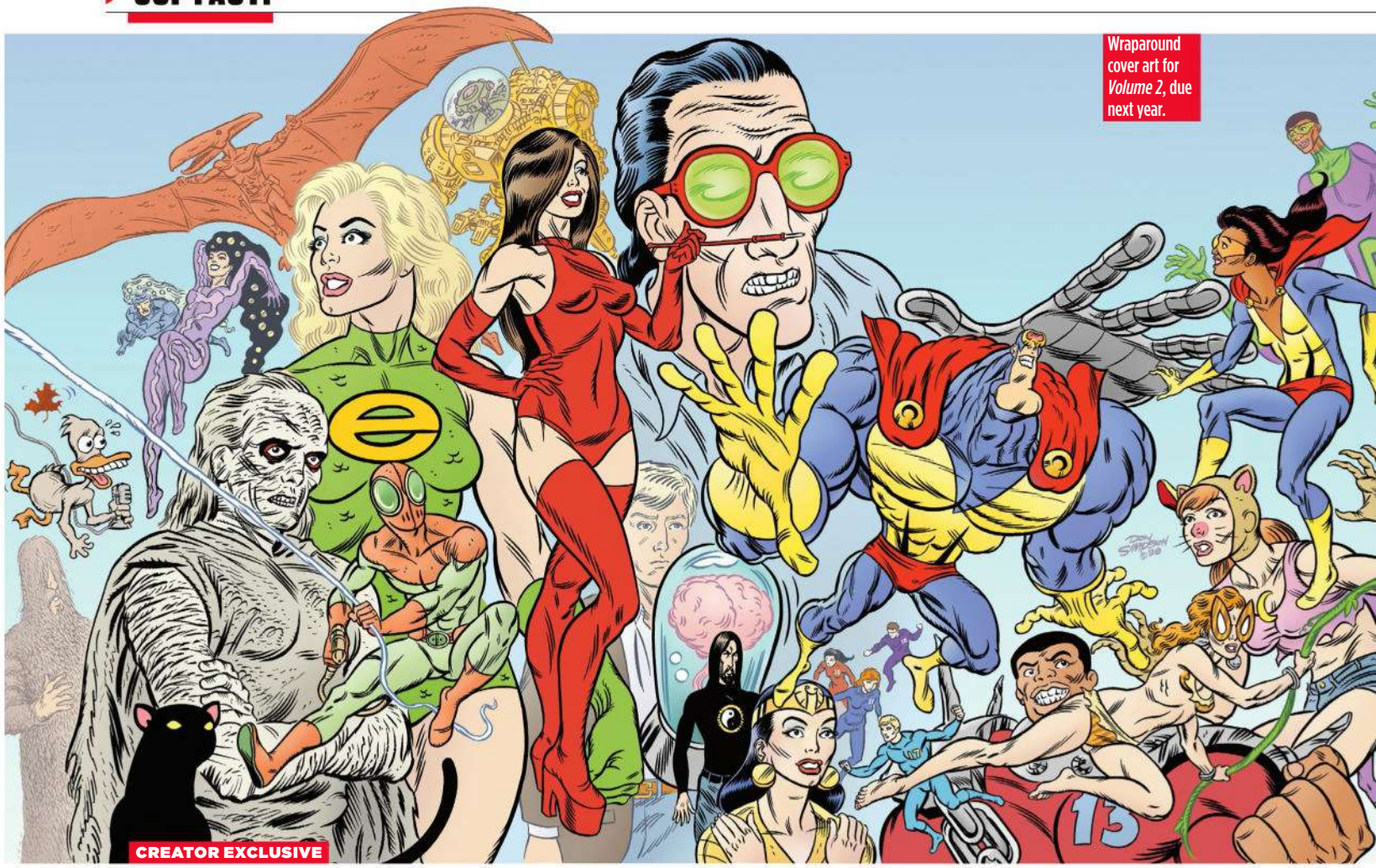
"An early thing that I said was, if a guest drove up to this hotel, they shouldn't look at it and say, 'We can't stay here tonight.' It can't be like *The Addams Family*," he says. "Then, in terms of the interior, I was chasing something really tactile like all those old New England hotels. A big reference for the interior was the Yankee Pedlar Inn in Ti West's *The Innkeepers*. I wanted to make it really eccentric and then stick to it."

As a comedy, Roller says he built *Haunted Hotel* to be a funny escape for audiences to visit, without having to overthink. "I like to raise questions that invite speculation and let people wonder about the world, but I personally don't have a lot of interest on this show in the serialised elements. I really like in this type of comedy that you could watch any one of these and you would know what's going on."

Haunted Hotel is on Netflix from 19 September.

SCI-FACT! **Creator Matt Roller has worked on three Dan Harmon comedy series: *Community*, *Rick And Morty* and *Krapopolis*.**

SCI-FACT! **Scheduled for 2026, *The Complete Megaton Man Universe Volume 2: The 1990s* includes Simpson's self-published *Bizarre Heroes*.**



Wraparound cover art for *Volume 2*, due next year.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Megatropolis' Finest

Don Simpson returns with old and new **Megaton Man**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

IT STARTED OUT IN 1984 AS A superhero satire, but you could be forgiven for thinking that Don Simpson takes *Megaton Man* a lot more seriously nowadays. Having previously relied on readers' familiarity with the genre's well-worn tropes, he's since gone back and filled in the details of the carefully constructed world of Megatropolis.

Now, after Simpson wrote a short story for the recent *Legends Of Indie Comics: Words Only* collection, two huge tomes of old and new material are set for release: the 604-page *The Complete Megaton Man Universe Volume 1: The 1980s* and *Megaton Man: Multimensions*, featuring contributions from 60 different writers and artists.

"I left Easter eggs in the very first issue of *Megaton Man*," recalls Simpson. "It was a typical megahero adventure – secret identity goes to work at the newspaper, *The Manhattan Project*; the 'fair city' is threatened by Dr Software; the love interest, controversial columnist Pamela Jointly is kidnapped and rescued... I'm leaving out the bit where Megaton smooches See-Thru Girl from the Megatropolis Quartet.

"The villain is defeated but instead of going back to normal, Pammy and Stella the See-Thru Girl head off to see America. Megaton Man fills in on the Megatropolis Quartet, the Cosmic Cue-Ball is unleashed and it goes from bad to worse."

Megaton Man was initially intended as a one-shot, but publishers Kitchen Sink Press commissioned an ongoing series, which ran for 10 issues. "Obviously, I was making it up as I went along but it was always a question of 'What happens next?'" continues Simpson. "As you will see from *Complete Volume 1*, I always planned for See-Thru Girl to become pregnant with Megaton Man's love child all along."

While Kitchen Sink publisher Denis Kitchen favoured more parodies, Simpson embarked upon a more nuanced course for 1988's *The Return Of Megaton Man* as our hero (aka Trent Phloog) swapped Megatropolis for the Midwestern college town where Pammy and Stella now resided. "It was more character-driven and about the civilian secret identity, less about the megaheroes," explains Simpson. "I really only scratched the

surface of those narrative possibilities in the 1980s. But the future sprouted from that moment and I still see those untold stories. And those ideas don't age, as ideas I never got to back then are still brand new ideas now!"

Featuring creators such as *Miracleman*'s Alan Davis, Bill Morrison, Steve Bissette and John McCrea, the 216-page *Megaton Man: Multimensions* also encompasses team-ups with the very diverse likes of Michael T Gilbert's *Mr Monster*, Larry Marder's *Tales Of The Beanworld* and Erik Larsen's *Savage Dragon*, among others.

"I'm looking forward to the synergies, old and new," says Simpson. "Some are played very straight, others for laughs – there are all kinds of moments I would have never dreamed up myself, such as a zombie apocalypse *Bizarre Heroes* by Craig Olsen and Nick Justus, which is just so over the top!"

The Complete Megaton Man Universe Volume 1: The 1980s is out 30 September; Megaton Man: Multimensions is out now.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

A New Bit Of Kit

The Phantom is under siege in his new solo title from Mad Cave Studios WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

PART OF THE DEFENDERS OF the Earth, alongside Flash Gordon and Mandrake the Magician, the Phantom is now flying solo in his new monthly title. Created by Lee Falk in a newspaper strip in 1936, the costumed crimefighter has had many incarnations down the years, dating right back to the 16th century.

Writer Ray Fawkes and artist Russell Olson, however, are focusing on the present-day adventures of the 21st and current Ghost Who Walks, Kit Walker.

"We've worked deliberately to develop a timeless feel to the book," explains Olson. "I like to think that this version of the Phantom/Kit is an extension of the traditional character. He's been in the job a while and is comfortable in the role. I would say that despite having broken in the purple pyjamas, he's still in awe of the jungle and its capacity for danger and wonder."

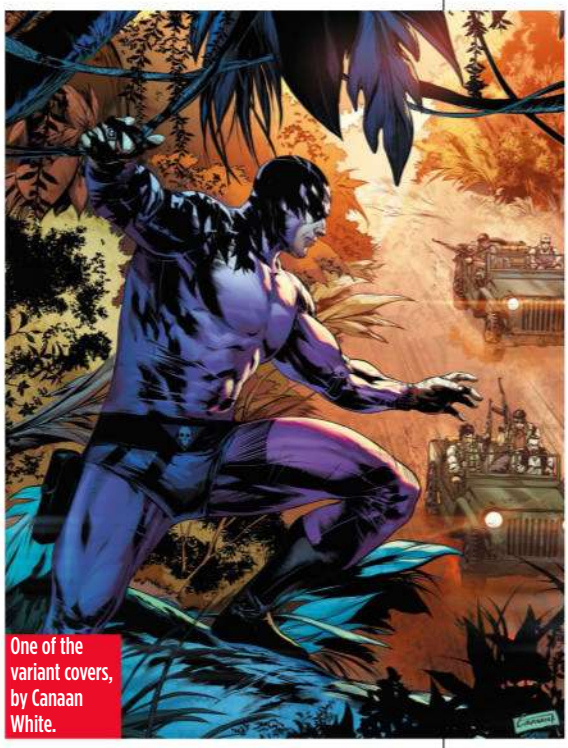
"We've also set him in a world deliberately removed from a lot of the trappings of the modern age – frankly, I can think of nothing more boring than a bunch of people trying to solve problems while looking at their phones, and I like the idea of Kit, Guran and Diana as timeless heroes," adds Fawkes.

He's referring respectively to Kit's oldest friend and his wife, who – like the Phantom – live in the fictional African country of Bangalla. With Olson noting that "we've talked a lot about avoiding white saviour tropes", he and Fawkes have approached any colonial themes from a more considered, contemporary perspective.

"Visually, I've modelled the forest of Bangalla on the flora and geography of East Africa and while there's an occasional anatopism such as massive tigers, I'm trying to consciously draw a location that would feel at home near Ethiopia or South Sudan," he continues.

"I feel it's important to avoid the pitfalls of casting all of Africa as either jungle or savannah."

> **"We've also set him in a world removed from a lot of the trappings of the modern age"**



One of the variant covers, by Canaan White.

"A lot of thought has gone into keeping faithful to the Phantom's core of heroism and adventure, while turning an eye towards more modern attitudes about colonialism and the political landscape of the world," adds Fawkes. "The first story in the series is all about invading outsiders trying to lay claim to part of Bangalla and how the Phantom and the Bandar people deal with them together.

"The Phantom also isn't an outsider himself – he grew up in Bangalla and the people there are his family. He respects and honours them with sincerity."

While Olson hints "there are definitely some familiar, and sometimes furry, faces that show up", Fawkes compares the revenge-style opening storyline to "a *Die Hard* kind of situation", and confirms that there won't be any connections to *Defenders Of The Earth*. "The story definitely expands outwards, but Kit and his friends and family are going to be handling their problems on their own – at least for now..."

The Phantom is out on 24 September.

SCI-FACT! **In early stories, the Phantom's jungle was on an island called Luntok, described as "off the coast of Java" (modern-day Indonesia).**

SCI-FACT! **Conan first crossed paths with Thoth-Amon in his debut story, "Phoenix On The Sword", which appeared in *Weird Tales* in December 1932.**

Full battle mode in a variant cover for issue one.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Snakes On A Plain

Snakes Alive! Conan meets Set and Thoth-Amon in crossover **Scourge Of The Serpent**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

LIKE LAST YEAR'S *Battle Of The Blackstone*, new Howardverse event series *Scourge Of The Serpent* is part of the wider plan that Titan Comics and Heroic Signatures have been building towards since relaunching the Cimmerian's comic adventures in 2023.

"All of them have narrative threads that are their own worthy adventures," says writer Jim Zub, confirming that the four-parter also spins out of the recent *Solomon Kane: The Serpent Ring* miniseries and *Savage Sword Of Conan* issue 10's crossover issue. "But if readers stick with us, they'll also see important links that carry on to build a wider mythic narrative."

The series pits Conan, Kull and Brule and Professor John Kirowan against the ancient snake god Set and her high priest, the Stygian sorcerer Thoth-Amon, and Zub has drawn extensively on three Robert E Howard short stories. "*Scourge Of The Serpent* is a cross pollination of 'The Shadow Kingdom', 'The God In The Bowl' and 'The Haunter In The Ring' but combines and evolves them in unexpected ways," he explains. "I originally envisioned 'The Shadow Kingdom' as the heart of this story but when I was researching snake-themed Robert E Howard stories, those other two jumped out at me and the plan became even more ambitious."

With Conan having encountered Thoth-Amon in his debut story, this is his 17-year-old sneak thief incarnation. "Just like in the original stories in *Weird Tales*, we jump around the timeline, showing Conan during different periods of his life," says Zub. "The young and brash Cimmerian who stabs first and asks questions later is a favourite of mine; he motivates storytelling with a mixture of strength, bravado and naïve courage. His inexperience with the supernatural also drives a lot of the discovery, which is a lot of fun to write."

Paving the way for a forthcoming Kull the Conqueror title, the various characters remain in their respective eras. "Kull and Brule stay in the Thurian Age, Conan stays in the Hyborian Age and John Kirowan stays in the 1930s," explains Zub. "Each adventure uncovers a piece of the large puzzle that readers get to see in its entirety."

Indeed Howard pioneered the concept of the multiverse in the '30s, long before the advent of either the Marvel or DC universe. "Before there were superheroes or superhero universes, he linked many of his sword and sorcery, historical fantasy, horror, western and occult stories together with shared mythology, symbols, names and ideas," says Zub. "I'm creating more connective tissue between the stories, but it was all there to start with."

Zub is enjoying working with artist Ivan Gil, who's illustrated numerous historical war stories for the European market. "His environments are impeccable, his action is intense and his storytelling rock solid," he says. "He's been able to take a wild amount of research material and incorporate it all together while still showcasing his own personal artistic style and strengths."

Conan The Barbarian: Scourge Of The Serpent is out on 24 September.

SCI-FACT! **Emma Peel appeared in 51 of the 161 episodes of *The Avengers*, from 1965 to 1968.**

NEW AUTHOR

JENNIFER KENNEDY

MEET THE WRITER BEHIND *OUR GIFTED HEARTS*, A GOTHIC RIFF ON *BLUEBEARD*

Tell us about your protagonist.
→ Fortune is a strong, determined soul. Having suffered the death of her child and been spurned by her lover, she refuses to let another man touch her. But when she's accused of witchcraft, she's forced to break that vow and marry a stranger to save herself.

What relationship does your book have to the *Bluebeard* folk tale?
→ Angela Carter's retelling in *The Bloody Chamber* was a big influence. Instead of being saved by a man, her heroine is saved by her mother. I went a step further by giving Fortune agency to save herself, and allowing her to exact some revenge.

How long did it take to write?
→ I started in 2019! The first draft was awful and I rewrote it from scratch. Originally, I had Fortune fall in love with one character, then decided to have no romance at all, until finally settling on a slow burn between her and another character.

Did you have to do much research?
→ I had a lot of fun watching videos about ravens. They are incredible birds. They can solve complex problems, have a sense of humour, and show empathy. I really enjoyed bringing Purdie, Fortune's companion, to life.

Got any advice for budding authors?
→ There is no right way to write. Work on your craft for the love of it, whenever you can. Most importantly, believe in your vision with everything you have.

Our Gifted Hearts is out on 14 October, published by Angry Robot.

CELLULOID JAM

There's a plethora of genre and genre-adjacent movies in the 69th BFI London Film Festival, including Guillermo del Toro's *Frankenstein* (above), Brit sci-fi *Rose Of Nevada* and enigmatic Chinese head-trip *Resurrection*.

The festival takes place from 8-19 October at venues in London and across the UK. Tickets are available from 16 September, visit **bfi.org.uk/lff**.

AVENGING ANGEL

It's the 60th anniversary of Emma Peel from *The Avengers* (no, the *real* Avengers), which doesn't make us feel old at *all*. What better reason to celebrate a British icon with some bespoke art? Prints and cards are needed – available at **artandhue.com/peel60**.

BOXING CLEVER

Let the Hunger Games begin! And by that, we mean the semi-regular hunt to B&M stores to pick up the latest *Doctor Who* action figure sets before the scalpers lay claim to their prize. A Fifteenth (but also Thirteenth and Fourteenth, completists!) Doctor TARDIS with two inserts and an "Eve Of The Daleks" duo await you now...

SCI-FACT! **Stamp was considered for James Bond, but producers baulked when he suggested starting the film disguised in Japanese make-up.**

THE FINAL FRONTIER

TERENCE STAMP 1938–2025

Remembering a true screen icon

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

Zod and co, about to meet some cops in *Superman II*.

AMERICAN PICTORIAL/THA/SHUTTERSTOCK

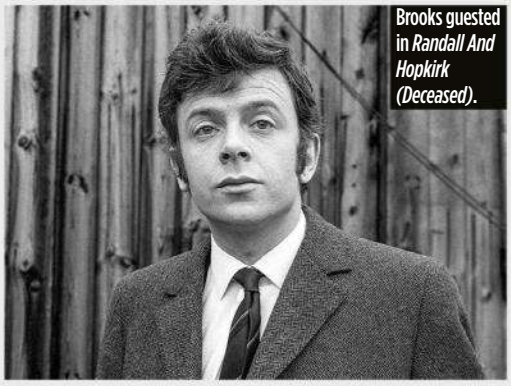
WITH EYES LIKE SOULFUL ice and features that appeared to owe more to geometry than genetics, Terence Stamp wasn't just a defining face of the 1960s but a striking screen presence across the decades. Born in Stepney, East London, the son of a merchant seaman, he studied at the Webber Douglas Academy of Dramatic Art. Cast in the title role of 1962's *Billy Budd*, he won a Golden Globe and an Oscar nomination.

Alongside key roles in 1967's *Far From The Madding Crowd* and *Poor Cow*, Stamp's otherworldly magnetism saw him cast in many genre entries across the years. He was knife-wielding cockney sidekick Willie Garvin in spy-fi spoof *Modesty Blaise* (1966) and played a film star haunted by the Devil in Edgar Allan Poe anthology *Spirits Of The Dead* (1968).

Superman (1978) and *Superman II* (1980) rescued him from a post-'60s career slump. Returning from a spiritual sojourn in India, Stamp embraced the chance to play saturnine Kryptonian revolutionary General Zod, a role that helped shed his sense of himself as a leading man: "I just decided I was a character actor now and can do anything."

It was a philosophy that found him playing a transgender woman to memorable effect in 1994's *The Adventures Of Priscilla, Queen Of The Desert*. His turn as Chancellor Valorum in *The Phantom Menace* was less satisfying – "It's about kids and toys and special effects" he reflected in 2013 – but Krypton welcomed him back when he voiced Superman's father Jor-El across 23 episodes of *Smallville*.

Stamp's final film appearance came as the enigmatic Silver-Haired Gentleman in Edgar Wright's psychological horror *Last Night In Soho* (2021). It was a role that capitalised on that unforgettable face to show the darker currents swirling beneath the immortal glamour of the 1960s.



Brooks guested in *Randall And Hopkirk (Deceased)*.

ITV/SHUTTERSTOCK

RAY BROOKS 1939–2025

Born in Brighton, Ray Brooks made his acting debut at the Nottingham Playhouse in 1956. Richard Lester's *The Knack... And How To Get It* (1965) brought him screen fame as serial womaniser Tolen. The role of resistance fighter David in *Daleks – Invasion Earth 2150 AD*, an adaptation of *Doctor Who*'s second Dalek serial, followed in 1966, the same year Brooks made Ken Loach's socially-charged TV play *Cathy Come Home*.

"I don't think I was ever that good an actor," he once reflected. "I was more an image of a young man."

In 1971 Brooks narrated 13 episodes of classic children's animation *Mr Benn*, the adventures of a bowler-hatted suburbanite transported through history by an enchanted fancy dress shop. It was a series with enduring appeal. Children, Brooks said, "love the simplicity of Mr Benn, the fact that he's very moral, always sorting out people's problems – including dragons".

MICHAEL SLOAN 1946–2025

Raised in London but born in New York City, Michael Sloan returned to America in 1974 to pursue a career in the TV industry.

A producer and prolific writer of episodic drama, he cut his teeth on detective shows like *Columbo*, *McCloud* and *Harry O*, but always had a taste for the fantastic. He wrote four episodes of *Battlestar Galactica*, including "Fire In Space", which was repurposed for theatrical release as part of 1979's *Mission Galactica: The Cylon Attack*.

Writing English dialogue for *Star Fleet*, the dubbed version of Japanese SF puppet show *X-Bomber*, Sloan also reunited Robert Vaughn and David McCallum for 1983's *The Return Of The Man From UNCLE*. A trio of Bionic TV movies followed: *Return Of The Six Million Dollar Man And The Bionic Woman* (1987), *Bionic Showdown* (1989) and *Bionic Breakdown* (1994). Sloan's biggest success came as co-creator of urban vigilante series *The Equalizer* in 1985.

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A WORLD

DIRECTOR DAN TRACHTENBERG ON TAKING AN ICON OF CINEMA

OF PAIN

IN A NEW DIRECTION FOR PREDATOR: BADLANDS

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

Dek with the legless Thia, a Weyland-Yutani synth.

AN ALIEN LANGUAGE fills the air. Translated into English it's saying, "Yautja are prey to no-one, friend to no-one. Predator to all." At least we know where we stand from the outset.

It's April 2025 and *SFX* is at a private screening in Burbank, LA, of early footage from *Predator: Badlands*. The film's director Dan Trachtenberg tells us it's "equally terrifying and exciting" for him to give a first look at what he's been working on.

He needn't be worried – even in a very rough, pre-vis stage the footage looks incredible. The first 20 minutes of the movie – barely glimpsed in either of the first two trailers – takes place on Yautja Prime, homeworld of the Predators. It's a world of desert plains, rocky crags and dull oceans.

We see Dek on a beach, brandishing an ornate sword with flames running across the blade, then venturing into a huge cavern, with massive jagged rocks, where he faces his brother, Kwei in battle. "Still too small to take me on!" Kwei says in their Yautja native tongue.

It's all training for what's to come: in order to join the clan and prove himself worthy, Dek must choose his prey. It's located on Kalisk, The Death Planet. Even their father fears it, Kwei says.

But then their father arrives, dressed in an ornate, horned mask, and Dek's journey of self-discovery truly begins...

Jump forward a few months and Trachtenberg is putting the finishing touches to the movie – "right up until 6 November" he jokes – and footage has been well received by fans. But they haven't seen anything yet, he promises.

"Our trailers have been pretty restrained. There's definitely still more surprises. Story-wise, they really just scratched the surface."

Various movie tricks were used for the legless look.

Director Dan Trachtenberg on the set of *Badlands*.

BIG BAD

If you *have* already seen the trailers, you'll have noticed that Weyland-Yutani – from the Alien Universe – plays a large part. So what is the corporation doing on Kalisk?

"Oh, that's better for the movie to tell you than for me to tell you," Trachtenberg laughs. "But what it alludes to, what I've been putting out there now, is that there aren't any humans in the movie. So it's certainly cool, the science fiction idea of it used to be that they would send a colony of humans to a place and they'd give them a synth in previous *Alien* instalments. It feels more authentic, more science in the fiction, to think that actually they'd probably send some synths out there first to make sure everything's all right before they send some humans. So there's definitely a big army of synths on that planet trying to figure out what's going on there and they are at odds with what Dek is also trying to do there."

At the heart – or core processor – of that is Thia (Elle Fanning), the Weyland-Yutani Weapons Division synth that ends up on a journey with Dek.

"The thing that I think makes Thia awesome is she is very different from the synths that we've seen," Trachtenberg explains. "Usually the synths are quite dry and she is the opposite of dry. I've made the comparison that it's like *Chewbacca And C-3PO: The Movie*. But C-3PO is the nervous Nellie. The fun of Thia is that she is really unflappable. She is positive under any circumstance. You get a flavour of that personality in the trailer when she pops into frame after slicing and dicing some crazy creatures. That is a really fun character to be stuck with a Predator, a Yautja that is a real hard ass and doesn't really want to talk too much and is more like Clint Eastwood or Mad Max, or Conan even. So they're made for a really fun pairing and something that we haven't seen in *Predator*, but also in the *Alien* franchise.

> "Thia brings more fun to the movie, that I think perfectly balances out all of the intensity"

"Having a character like Thia brings more fun to the movie, that I think perfectly balances out all of the intensity."

He says that when he was much younger, he'd get his action fixes from movies like *Police Academy*, *The Naked Gun* and *True Lies*.

"There's nothing like a laugh that is a cathartic release amidst all of the intensity and violence and all that stuff. So I love when there's comedy and there's fun in an action thing. I don't respond when something is just →

WORLD BUILDING

Time to dig deep into Yautja culture

"There's a lot in this movie that is almost more from the extended universe than is from things that are properly in the movies," Trachtenberg says. "I wanted to be very careful, in making this, that I not fall into a trap that is making something that is more lore-focused than story-focused.

"We did embrace making things feel a little bit more ahead [technology-wise] than things we've previously seen. But at the same time, I wanted it to feel a little bit more culturebound, which is why the cloaks and the sword and the masks are a little bit different. So it's not like the spacesuit that you might associate with previous iterations of the Predator, it's more like what they might be wearing in their normal daily life, not on the hunt."

And as for franchise Easter eggs, Trachtenberg promises a few.

"There's several references, the skulls on the wall, and certainly on the holograms in the ship, there's lots of fun references."

PICTURES: NICOLA DOVE/20TH CENTURY STUDIOS; STOCK IMAGES: MIGUEL MARTINS DESIGN/GETTY, ISTOCK.COM

PAYBACK TIME

Why the Arnold Schwarzenegger coda was added to *Predator: Killer Of Killers* after the film was released

"It was made and the deals were not done," Trachtenberg explains. "We were like, 'Oh, we have it and we had to hold it back' and then the deals were done. So it was like, 'Well, what do we do?' And it became, 'Well, we could announce it at Comic Con.'"

He says that conversations about *Predator* with Arnold Schwarzenegger are going "Really good. Especially now that piece was released and Arnold got to see it." He laughs. "It was all really exciting for me. It was a crazy moment to be sitting down in front of an idol and to be dead honest, I almost said this to him, but I really just felt like the kid in *Last Action Hero*. I think a lot of people probably feel that around him, but I *was* that kid and still *am* that kid, annoyingly, and he's still Arnold."

We have to ask: does that mean his often-spoken-of third idea for a sequel to *Prey* would include Schwarzenegger? There's a long pause before he replies.

"I do not know. I don't know yet."

pure comedy, for whatever reason, I don't often fall. So it was a joy to make a movie like this where I get to embrace the kind of things that I like in action movies."

So far, so new. But why a different approach to such an established franchise?

"When *Prey* came out and was well received, I suddenly realised, 'Oh shit, they're going to ask me about a sequel.' I was like, 'Fuck, I've never been in that position. What am I going to do?' A lot of times people make a cool thing and then the sequel is just the sequel to the cool thing. It's not cool on its own merit. So I was really thinking, 'Okay, if I'm gonna make another *Predator*, what else is there that hasn't been done?' The thing that came to me was, 'Well, what if we made a *Predator* movie where the Predator was the protagonist?

"Truly, how could we have people root for the creature, which is not a thing that has happened in the *Predator* franchise, but also in movie history. We don't really have this as a →

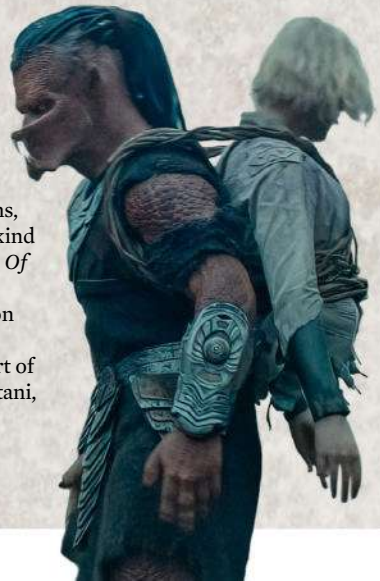
POWER PACK

Elle Fanning is Thia

What can you tell us about your character, Thia?

People have seen a lot – there's definitely a lot more to discover. She is a Weyland-Yutani synth, but she's broken. There's a couple of factors that make her a new type of synth that we haven't seen before. Programming-wise, she's a little bit further along with the intelligence and maybe the most human. So she was able to have a distinct personality. That's partly due also to her being a bit broken as well, that she has these glitches and it brings this humanity to her, but she's quite feisty and spunky and very full of life for being a robot. Which is what was written and what kind of Dan wanted to explore.

Something that I love about the script and the movie is that it's filled with all these very human themes with just creatures. We have the Predator and a robot, but it's a quite emotional movie. Thia's journey is emotional. Dek doesn't want to accept her at first, and it's kind of that buddy comedy where she really wants to be there and he's like, "Oh stop talking to me." There's a comedic side to her for sure, which you wouldn't expect in other *Predator* films, to have this kind of *Guardians Of The Galaxy*-esque buds on the road.



She's a part of Weyland-Yutani,

Thia is a more human-like synth than previous ones.

Fanning plays more than one synth in the movie.

We bet the actor enjoyed getting legless.

and their corporation is a bit corrupt at times. So she's a little tricky. She definitely has secrets of her own. But she's funky and spunky and I was glad that I wasn't just playing a robot in the traditional sense. Of course, there were physicality things – I didn't have legs, so there was logistically figuring out certain movements and things like that. But we tried to also make her quite human and understanding of emotions, I will say.

Were there dummy versions of Thia on set?

It was hilarious. There were dolls of me lying around – some were plushy, some were hard. I would take photos with myself all the time. There were severe action sequences that I couldn't be on the back for, but most of the time we were in harnesses. I had the blue leggings and we had this harness for my legs so they could stick straight out from me because if they were on normally then they would get in the way of his legs.

We were hooked together and we're flying through the air. Then we would have these scenes walking up a hill. We had some wire rigs and we also had this rig that was like a wheelbarrow almost, where I was on the wheel and he's pulling me and we're rolling up. So, yeah, Dimitrius had a lot of heavy lifting. It was called Backpack, that was the fake name – now I think people know why.

Were you already aware of what Weyland-Yutani is?

I was totally aware, the *Alien* films I have seen. We went to see *Romulus* while we were filming as a cast and crew. Great to see Andy, the synth in that, which was inspiring. Not that we take anything from it. You have to be respectful to the universe, because there's so many rules and, of course, it's a lore, but you also want to be able to separate yourself into your own thing. But Dan was aware of that.

Andy and I, we're similar synths, in a way, possibly. But maybe I'm a little more advanced, technology-wise. Bishop is a good example too. I did watch the movies again just to see how everyone has interpreted the synths. People were excited to see too in the little first teaser. But I was geeking out. There are some real iconic things that were laying around our set, props and really cool stuff. In the trailer they showed the super power loader. That was there. So I'm like, "Okay, that's pretty iconic." So I was excited about all of that.

And so many people... I mean, there have been *Alien Vs Predator* in the past, but I also think people would really like to see Dan do that, you know?

What was your most outlandish or "pinch me" moment?

There's a few that I'm like, "Oh God, I can't necessarily say" because I also play two characters, which I've said, it's out there, but I haven't talked about the second character. I can't really talk about her personality-wise, but there's Thia and there's also Tessa and she, you can probably gather, is a synth as well. The challenge was balancing those two characters and finding that harmony and their differences because they're very different.

Logistically, we had this one day. We called it Squirt Canyon. It was in this canyon with a huge river that I later learned was filled with eels, but we were strapped together back to back, running, doing this stunt scene, the camera is on a big crane. We had to take boats to get out there. We're like, "Dan, what? What is this? This is crazy." It was exciting, but it was also a physically challenging day. But I love that it wasn't just on a sound stage. I think that's when I was like, "Okay, this is very neat." We kept saying, "Let's get as many behind-the-scenes photos as possible" because I think nowadays, people just think everything's done on the computer. Of course, some things, it is, but it's neat when you can say that it wasn't.

classic movie monster and we are with him in a very special way, which I think you'll see."

Trachtenberg explains why he thinks now is the right time to look at the long-established franchise differently.

"We've seen so many without this point of view. We've seen so many giant movies with worlds, with incredible side characters and villains that are different creatures. We've had so many of them. Why was *Scream* the right time for that movie to come up? Because at that point, we had seen so many of that [slasher films], right? That's always the moment. This movie could have been made before, because it's been a long time that we've had all these wonderful creatures in movies and they've never been the actual protagonist of the movie. They've just been there alongside their human companions."

FRANCHISE WITH LEGS

Trachtenberg explains the process of what elements make a *Predator* movie special. "It's by never fully being only the one thing, everything always has to be multiple things at once," he says.

"*Jaws* is one of my favourite movies of all time. It's not my favourite *horror* movie. I don't consider *Jaws* a horror movie. But when it's scary, it's fucking terrifying. When it's funny,

FACE OFF

Dealing with a problem head-on

"When we did some early tests for this movie we realised the obvious thing is that it's typically a horror character and it pops out of the shadows for a few seconds and we see glimpses and it's cloaked for so often. This movie we really wanted people to connect with Dek. Unfortunately the rotors that go on inside the mask that is usually adorned for the Predator not only affect all the physicality of the creature, so it makes people move a certain way, but also just does not have the articulation to bring people in and connect to a creature. We were trying to do this thing of we want you to bond with a horrific looking creature.

"So the methodology was a guy in a suit and you're seeing suit, the whole thing, other than his face. The face is all digital, handled by Wētā Workshop for the physical and Wētā Digital for the CG in the movie."

Dek's face was created digitally by Wētā.

Schuster-Koloamatangi is over seven feet tall.

COMING OF RAGE

Dimitrius Schuster-Koloamatangi is Dek

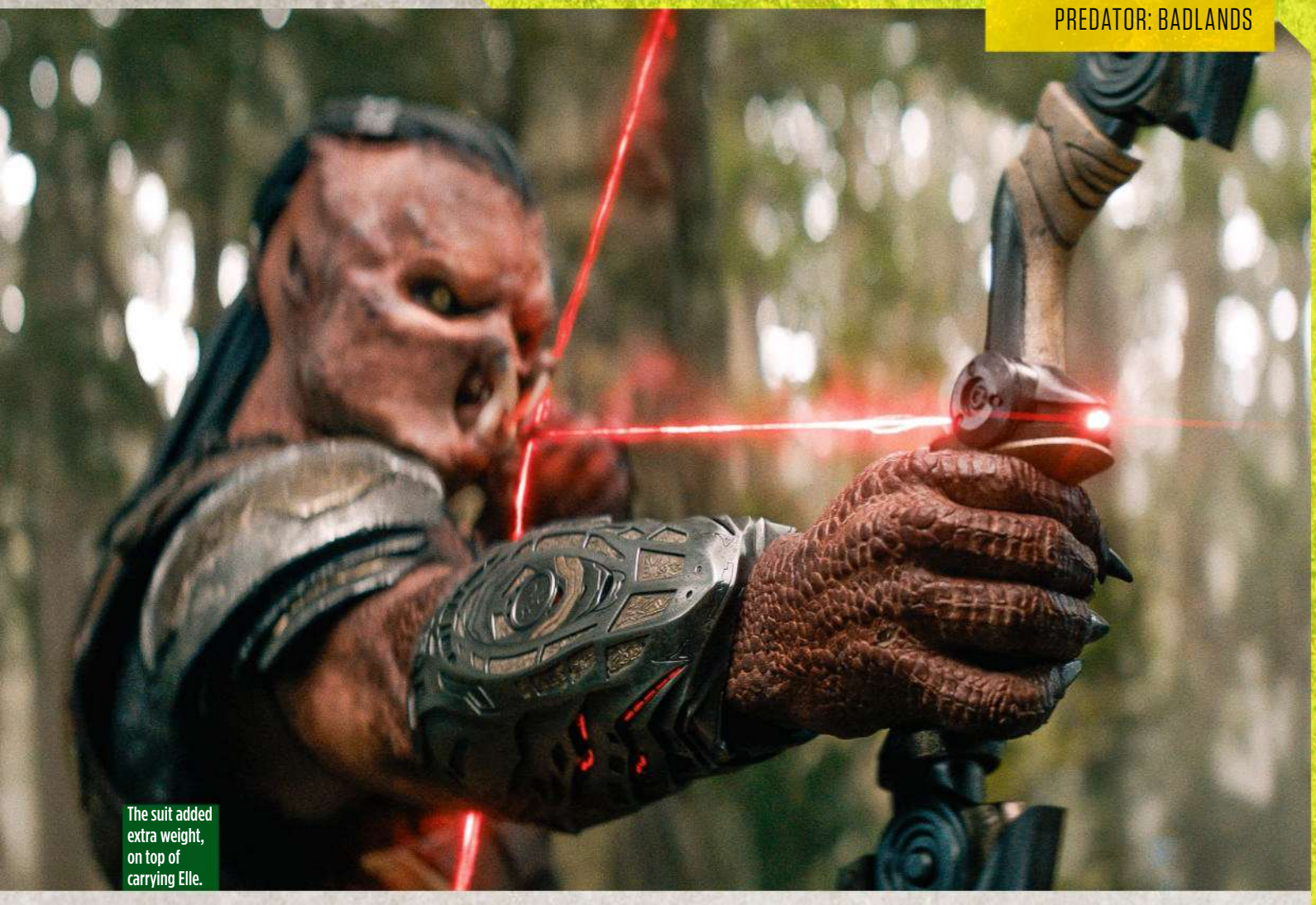
What can you tell us about Dek?

I love his whole attitude that literally nothing will stop him. There's a lot that goes against him, but he's always ready to just give his all. If that means he'll die on his sword then so be it, but as long as he's being true to himself, he has no care in the world.

A lot of the stuff in the franchise hasn't been established quite yet, in terms of the Yautja culture, being on the planet, all these things haven't really been seen. So we had a lot of freedom to play and try things and figure out – why is Dek doing what he is doing? Why is he moving the way he's moving? There was a certain level of trust that I had with Dan, so he would allow me to just bring my interpretation of the character. We'd be like, "Okay, just play" and then I'd bring it and he would correct me when I needed to be corrected. It was a really fun way to work.

Is it quite gruelling to do all that action in a suit?

A little bit. It was challenging, I won't lie, being in the suit. But what helped was knowing that everyone who's played the Predator has gone through something like this. Accepting the role to play this character, you know what it comes with. So accepting it early and then just going with it really helped me. But



The suit added extra weight, on top of carrying Elle.

physical body changes... in the suit, throughout the entirety of the shoot, I think I lost maybe close to 15 kgs. You're just constantly sweating the whole time.

The good thing about the suit was because they were wanting a bit more performance-led scenes, it was an open cowl and then the rest of it was suit. So at least in terms of the breathing and in terms of trying to get some electrolytes in or eat, that was all good. But yeah, it's just the rest of my body feeling it! With the suit that was pretty much like 10 kgs extra weight added on.

But along with the costume I had to wear contact lenses, the Predator contacts, and those blurred my vision. So before we would shoot, we would block first without the contacts just so I could step it through and see where I needed to be. Once the contacts got on, it was just "Try and do it as well as you can like we rehearsed and just try and find your mark to hit your marks" [laughs]. I used all of these obstacles as ways to become my character a little bit more. My character in the film has a few disadvantages of his own. So using those certain things helped me ground the character in a bit of authenticity and just make it real.

You learned the Yautja language, didn't you?

Yes sir, I did. It was actually quite funny because when I first auditioned for the role, they sent a one-page script in English and they were like, "Do one take in a made-up language, however you interpret that." So in my mind, I'm thinking, "Okay sweet, since it's a Predator, there's not really a language, I can just make it up. This is awesome, I don't need to learn any lines, I just freestyle it." It wasn't until a few meetings that they were like, "We're going to link you up with our dialect coach who's constructed the language." I was like, "I beg your pardon?" [Laughs] That was the beginning of the journey of learning the language. That was a fun process!

What's the process of learning an alien language?

The way the dialect coach constructed it, he built it pretty much from scratch as a real language. Even the sentence structure of the language is unique to the way that the words are put together – he has all the words mean something, he has connecting words, he has words for plural things. It was crazy.

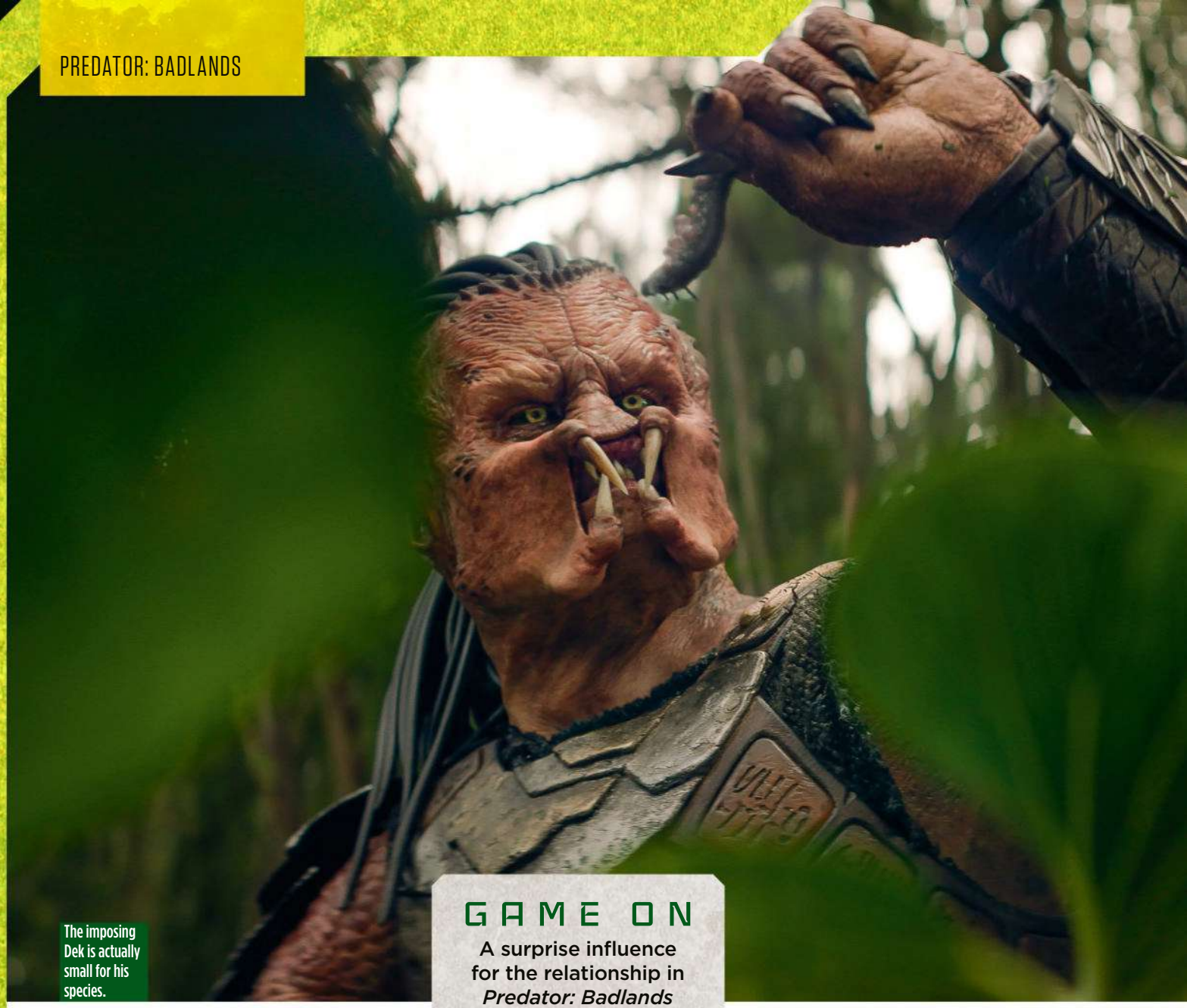
The normal script is all in English and then the lines are translated. It's quite interesting because when I'm saying the lines in English, it doesn't quite feel right. Even the way my body will be postured and whatnot. Because to be able to do the language, you have to position yourself in a certain way. So once I switch from English to Yautja, I just fall into that big character straight away – my posture is where it needs to be, my throat is opening up even how I speak, the octave that I speak in drops, so it's a lower tone. It's quite cool how much it transforms the character just by switching the language.

What was your craziest on-set experience?

Avoiding spoilers, the craziest days on set were where we had to walk through this river, a canyon. As you've seen on the trailer, I wear Elle as a backpack... So there was this canyon and the river was rushing – it was *fast* and I had to run against it. So I'm carrying the backpack with Elle on and I'm trying to run through a river, it's limited crew, the water's cold. It was a massive few days down there at Waitomo. They were probably my most challenging days, but my most funniest days on set.

You're actually carrying Elle?

We did a few with the dummy if they were long enough shots, but most of the time I was carrying Elle. She's wearing blue tights to edit it out and then just a few wires connecting her to alleviate some of the weight. But yeah, for the most part I'm carrying Elle!



The imposing Dek is actually small for his species.

it's hilarious. When there's drama, it's incredibly sincere and authentic. And then when there's adventure, it's high seafaring adventure. It's all things. It's not one thing. It is excellent at all things.

"So this movie, in this tone, the Predator's gotta be badass and ferocious and there's going to be this fun thing with Thia and that's gonna be funny, but also sincere and have a pulse of its own. It's got to be all things so that it's, 'Oh, now the pendulum isn't swinging all the way in this direction. Now it's this thing.' It's actually trying to be a full meal, because those are *my* favourite movies."

That meal comes in at around 90 minutes – good news for fans of short running times. "I enjoy not overstaying my welcome and being able to leave people breathless by the end," he says – which is bad news for anyone hoping for extended editions of *Prey* or *Badlands*. "I've never been hungry for that myself and I don't think these movies will need those either."

He does, however, promise fans of the franchise lots of bonus material for a future Blu-ray release. "There's tons. I'll tell you what was really special: Alec Gillis, who's our creature designer that started out with Stan Winston from the very first *Predator* and has been with *Alien* and *Predator* since their beginning, is also a really charming, funny man. There was this wonderful thing where he collaborated this time with Wētā Workshop. Even though they've been around for a while, they still feel like young blood and new school compared to Alec, and it was their first time working on a *Predator* movie, so Alec went and met up with them. We took some cameras with Alec and I think that will make for a really lovely feature that people can look forward to, not only just because it's so entertaining, but also there's just so much history there and so much cool behind the scenes there as well.

"It was awesome, he would speak with tears in his eyes. I would have tears hearing his experience about it. The movie is very much the melding of all sorts of different practices that create movie magic."

GAME ON

A surprise influence for the relationship in *Predator: Badlands*

"As inspired as I am by movies, I'm very inspired by videogames," Trachtenberg says. "*Shadow Of The Colossus*, where you have a protagonist that's paired with someone else that provides colour and connection and there's a thing with a horse that's devastating when you play the game... This was a little bit inspired by that in terms of wanting to see the Predator with someone else, this kind of character with the opposite of him. He's very laconic. She is not. She's capable in ways that he is not. But also physically, she's got a real *thing* that I'm so excited for you guys to see."

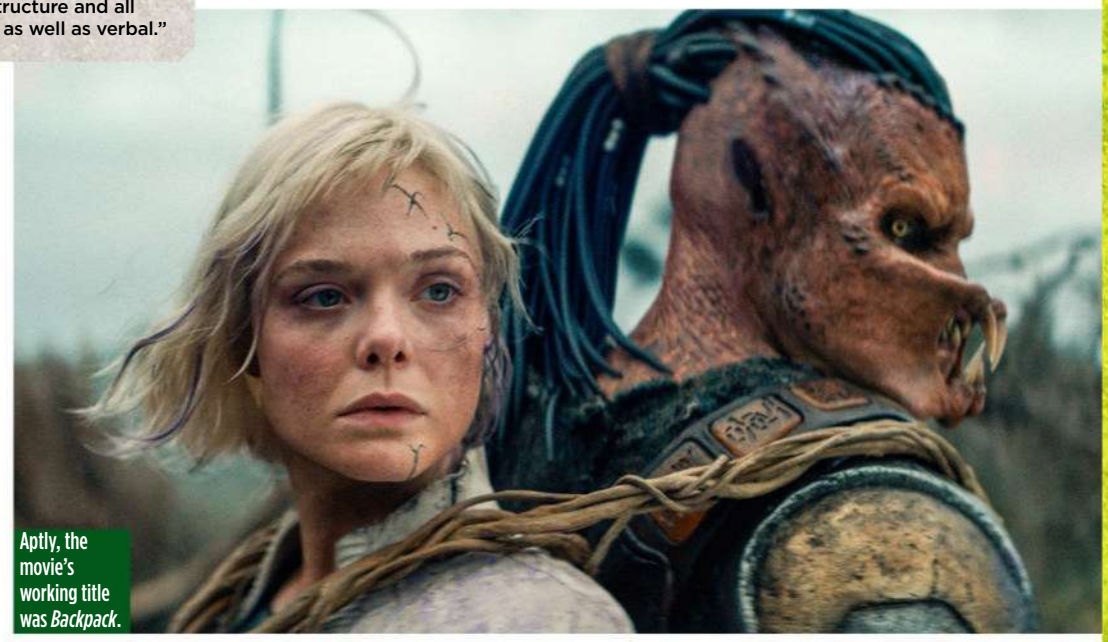
TONGUE-TIED

Get ready to learn Yautja

"We insanely decided to really treat [the language] properly and we reached out to the guy who does the Na'vi language [in *Avatar*], who was very occupied and recommended his mentee. So we did it the way that *The Lord Of The Rings* would do Elvish, for *Game Of Thrones* you do Dothraki...

"All the stuff that you've seen in other *Predator* movies, there's no sense of it. People from the Internet have tried to make sense of it, but none of it was made with intention. So we decided to make it with intention and we completely developed the language. So everything they're speaking has actual rules and structure and all that stuff. Written as well as verbal."

Marokopa Falls presented a challenge for the stars.



Aptly, the movie's working title was *Backpack*.

We see more of Predator culture in *Badlands*.

Speaking of movie magic, sharp-eyed readers will have noticed that Thia is missing her legs and carried by Dek in the movie...

"We came up with a lot of different ideas and throughout the course of the movie, we literally did every version of it," Trachtenberg says of how they created the illusion. "There's a version where she's supported by and suspended with wires. There's a version where we built this wheelbarrow to assist her, and Dimitrius [Schuster-Koloamatangi] is pulling the wheelbarrow and it's holding her legs. And then one day Elle said we needed to do something much more simple at the moment. She was like, 'We're making this movie with all the practical, shouldn't we try one time where I just stand up and do it myself, move my body in a weird way and I'll make it look that way, like movie magic? I was like, 'Elle, I love you.'

> "I got more movies to figure out, to start to plan in case we're successful"

"JJ [Abrams] was always a big proponent and would push us like, 'What if we just shake the camera and then throw some glass in it and it'll look like an accident? Do it practically, find the way they would have done it in the beginning times.' So Elle did it, and it was magical. Then from that period on, it became, 'Well, we could just have them walk.' We really got away with a lot less at the very end of the shoot. Dimitrius really wished that we had figured that out earlier! But eventually we did figure it out, and it was thanks to Elle really saying, 'I could just move in a weird way and we'll believe it.'"

As for the future of *Predator*, it certainly sounds as though Trachtenberg isn't quite done with it yet.

"I got more movies to figure out, to start to plan in case we're successful, I have to start thinking about that."

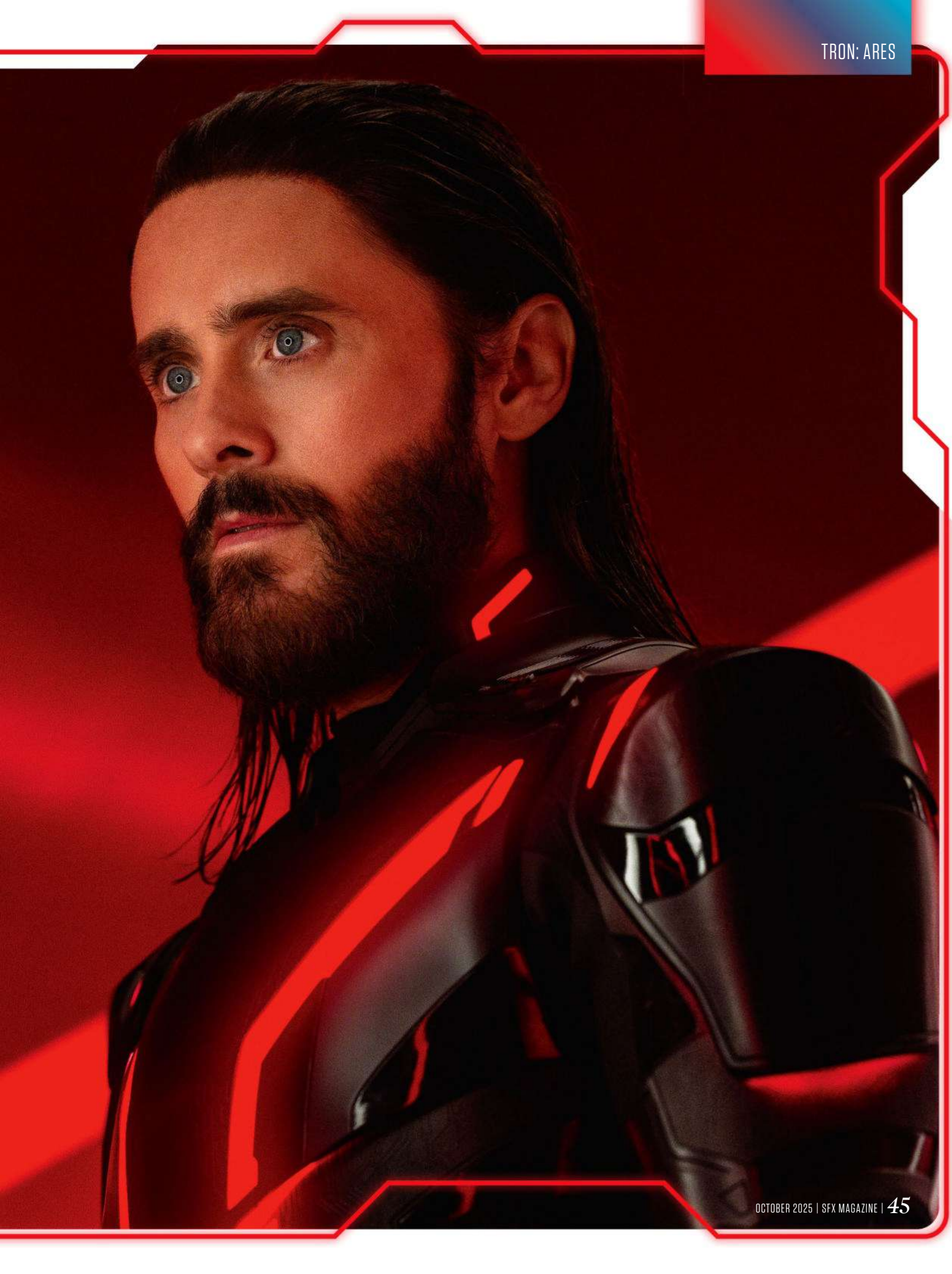
Movies plural? There's another pause. "Well, there's tons more that we could do, you know? I have movies that I've been dying to make, starting at the very beginning of my career, 10 years ago, that I'm still trying to make today and would look forward to making those as well. But I am having a lot of fun inside this universe, for sure."

Predator: Badlands is in cinemas from 7 November.

GAME CHANGER

SFX HEADS TO VANCOUVER TO VISIT THE *TRON: ARES* GRID AND TALK ALL THINGS **TRON** WITH THE FILMMAKERS BEHIND THE LONG-AWAITED SEQUEL

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**



Jared Leto is Ares, an AI soldier on the run.

SFX IS HALFWAY UP a snowy mountain, watching Greta Lee shoot a laser at a tree, and yet that's far from the strangest thing happening. Behind Lee, the entire mountain range is moving – and not just a little, but a new peak is emerging from the ground. "That looks good," calls director Joachim Rønning. "Action!"

Okay, admittedly, we're not really on a mountain, despite being just outside of Vancouver, where there are mountains aplenty. We're actually on a studio lot, witnessing a scene from *Tron: Ares* being filmed on The Volume, the massive LED screen made famous by *The Mandalorian*. Watching The Volume in action is an otherworldly experience; an engineer can change what's appearing on screen at the director's whim, allowing the background to be customised on the fly, the actors reacting accordingly. The main direction today? "Act cold!"

The fact that the latest *Tron*, the third instalment in the series, is utilising cutting-edge technology should come as little surprise. The 1982 original and its belated sequel, 2010's *Tron: Legacy*, both utilised groundbreaking computer graphics to immerse us in the world of Tron, which primarily takes place on "the grid" – the digital realm created by Jeff Bridges's character Kevin Flynn. *Ares* upholds that, ahem, legacy.

"One thing about developing this movie for a while is that the technology has finally advanced to a place where it's more possible to do what needs to be done," says producer Justin Springer, who also worked on *Legacy*. A sequel was first posited 15 years ago, but a variety of factors, including rewrites and directors dropping out, contributed to the project's delay.

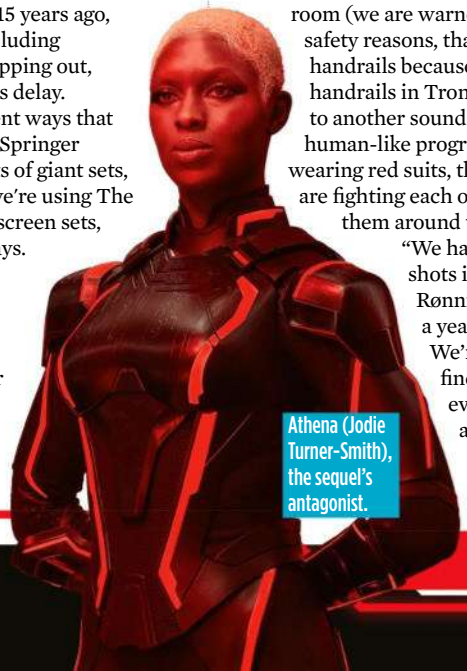
"There are many different ways that we're making this movie," Springer continues. "We've built lots of giant sets, a couple of Light Cycles, we're using The Volume, we're using blue-screen sets, we're on location for 30 days. We're employing every technique we can."

ON YOUR BIKE

SFX can attest to the sheer scale. On a different soundstage, a futuristic throne room – picture the inside of the Death Star, but all shiny red surfaces – has been constructed, its huge bay window facing another giant set on the other side of the room (we are warned, for health and safety reasons, that there are no handrails because there are no handrails in Tron). Moving through to another soundstage, two dozen human-like programs – half of them wearing red suits, the other half blue – are fighting each other, wires pulling them around the blue-screen set.

> **"That's what drew me – the concept of these assets coming into the real world"**

"We have over 2,100 VFX shots in the movie," Rønning tells *SFX* over a year and a half later. We're catching up, finding out how everything's coming along. "Industrial Light & Magic are at their very best,



Athena (Jodie Turner-Smith), the sequel's antagonist.

Visual effects are still at the heart of the film.

Something shady must be going on here...

Director Joachim Rønning (right) on set.

firing on all cylinders, and my brain... I'm spending four hours in the theatre every day, just looking at shots. That's the way of movie-making on this level, it's a very tedious, intense, long process."

Rønning is something of a professional at this level, having previously helmed the likes of *Maleficent: Mistress Of Evil* and *Pirates Of The Caribbean: Salazar's Revenge*. Still, *Ares* has presented many new challenges. "You're expected to push the envelope on every level and in every department," he explains. "There are so many moving parts, so it's very, very challenging, but then it's also very rewarding."

One technological advancement that has helped production designer Darren Gilford is the 3D printer, which allowed the team to "grow" objects, including parts of the iconic Light Cycle, the motorbike-esque vehicle that leaves a deadly laser line behind it. In the previous movies, the Light Cycles were almost entirely rendered within a computer (though one Light Cycle was made in real life *after* the filming of *Legacy* completed, for promotional purposes). For *Ares*, the Cycles were made physical – something *SFX* can confirm after riding one – the bulk of each bike being built around a Harley-Davidson. Bringing the Light Cycle to life was important not only because the physical prop would look better on camera, but also because, for the first time in the series, they go literally off-grid, with much of *Ares* taking place in the real world.

"That's what drew me into the project – the concept of these assets coming into the real world," Rønning says. "I hadn't seen that before in this franchise. That felt original and big, like a great next natural step in the evolution of *Tron*. It was a tremendous undertaking. We closed down Vancouver for six weeks of nights and tore it apart, and as much as possible was real. You can feel that when you watch the film – it feels next level."

GRIDLOCKED

Ares begins with two warring companies – ENCOM, taken over by Flynn at the conclusion of *Tron*, and Dillinger Systems, run by the heirs of Ed Dillinger, *Tron*'s original villain – searching for the "holy grail" of code. That's the permanence code, which will allow complex digital systems to exist permanently in the real world. Imagine 3D printing, but instead of growing the wheel arch of a Light →

A thrilling chase through the digital skies.

Evan Peters and Gillian Anderson's Dillingers.

"A lot of VFX artists are in the industry because of the original Tron"

Cycle over a few days, you can instantly print a battle-ready artificial intelligence in the shape of Jared Leto. Where ENCOM wants to use this technology for good, Dillinger wants to weaponise their printed soldiers and sell them to the highest bidder. "It's a classic setup: one company wants to do good, the other bad," says Rønning.

A few things complicate matters, namely Leto's Ares, an unstable program ordered to hunt down Lee's character Eve, whose tree experiment is part of her search for the permanence code. She wants to use the code to make the world a better place, creating food and energy systems. When she meets Ares, the pair quickly find themselves on the run from Dillinger Systems, with Ares wanting to discover his humanity and Eve, in turn, becoming more in touch with her own. Meanwhile, Dillinger sends another warrior to hunt them down, Athena, played by Jodie Turner-Smith. "She's Ares number two, but ultimately, when he betrays Dillinger and goes on the run with Eve, she pursues them and becomes the antagonist," says Springer.

Dillinger's menacing red-and-black soldiers.

When *SFX* was on set, the production team attempted to hide the fact that Ares meets a somehow still-alive Flynn, played by Bridges. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately) for Disney, the actor revealed his return to the franchise in an interview last year, with the studio then embracing the leak and including Flynn in the latest *Ares* trailer. "He's very much in the film, like, really in it," confirms Rønning. "He's like a ghost in the machine. He lives on the old 1982 Flynn grid, on the old Flynn server, the OG grid. We've had a lot of fun travelling back to that period, looking at the original movie, trying to mimic the look and feel of that period with new technology."

There are, in fact, three separate grids in *Ares*. First, the returning ENCOM grid from *Legacy*, which has a bright sky. "It's *50 Shades Of Blue*," Rønning jokes. Then there's the original Flynn grid, making its first appearance since the 1982 film. "Everybody was trying to work on that," Rønning says. "A lot of VFX artists are in the industry because of the original *Tron*. So you get a lot of love and people wanting to work weekends because they want to be part of that." And finally, the new Dillinger grid, Ares and Athena's red-coloured home. "I didn't want any soft corners; I wanted everything to be hard-edged," Rønning says. "It was a tremendous journey with production designer Darren Gilford and ILM, creating these three grids."

Both the design and story philosophy behind *Ares* respect what came before, but also push things forward. "It's a little bit like a recipe," Rønning says. "For a respectful new instalment in the franchise, you need to honour and respect the history and, at the same time, create something new so you're continuing to build on the shoulders of the previous films."

Ares is notable for not bringing back any major characters from *Legacy* other than →

PHOTO CREDIT: GIULIO MARCOCCHI/SIPA PRESS

Lisberger is proud to have passed the *Tron* torch.

Eve tries to make her escape from a tech giant.

THE (REAL) CREATOR

Tron writer and director Steven Lisberger talks *Ares*

How is it seeing your original 1982 creations rendered in the real world for *Ares*?
We shot the original film on Stage Four on the Disney lot, and there really was nothing there, just black sets. It felt like a stage play. And then to go to Vancouver and see Light Cycles going down the street, it's quite a shock...

Could you ever have imagined *Tron* becoming this ongoing film franchise?
It certainly has all moved past me. I feel that way when I see the Tron ride at Disney World. To have these fantasies manifest in reality to this scale, it makes me glad that the things I was imagining were nice and I wasn't dreaming of war and carnage, because there are enough people in the world that have manifested what's in their imaginations and it hasn't been pleasant for anyone.

What do you feel thematically links the *Tron* films?
It's about overcoming limitations. It's about the fact that this technology promises to free us, that constraints are going to fall away and we will be magically free. What inevitably happens is that we end up with new constraints and limitations. The characters in *Tron* are discovering what the new limitations and constraints are. It's interesting, because the medium is the message. When you make a *Tron* film, you're experiencing that exact same phenomenon. It's been a lot of fun watching the next generation of filmmakers making a *Tron* film, which by definition forces you to go where you haven't been before. The making of the film physically becomes thematically connected with the story.

The original *Tron* is surprisingly optimistic about technology freeing us.
We were very naive back then and so optimistic, but it felt different. We were a group of artists, and all the people we talked to were computer engineers. It was as if they didn't realise that what they were delving into could be described as an artistic endeavour. They just saw it as engineering. It was a wonderful opportunity and the tools were so amazing. And we were at Disney! We used to joke, "Where's Bambi?!"

The villain of the 1982 film was an artificial intelligence gone rogue. Was that a warning about the future?
For me, the advancement of AI is like having a child. When you have a child, you're forced, because the child looks up to you, to act your age, and it forces you to examine yourself and think about what you represent to your child, to the next generation. So the question is, regarding AI, who's going to be the adult in this relationship? Because I look at the world and I have a longing for a more adult attitude, particularly in America these days. I hate to think that AI is going to be the adult entity in this relationship. I hear people are shocked that AI is hallucinating and making mistakes. That's a blessing. It's quite charming. I will be much more scared if someone tells me AI never makes mistakes. That's when the real problem starts. I like to say that it's imperative that we, as an artistic community, kick this technology around before it kicks us around. I'm weary of hearing all the dreary and apocalyptic predictions of the future of technology.

How much of yourself did you see in Flynn while writing the original?
I was living the story of the film. I was on an adventure and semi-lost in a world of new digital technology. I had to live up to whatever everyone around me expected of me, because I was responsible for putting everyone in this world. Then it came down to believing it in my vision and, most importantly, believing in everybody else who was contributing to making this work out. Jeff told me, "Well, my performance is imitating you."

Is it strange that the character appears in the sequels but he's written by new writers?
You see oneself go through these archetypes, and then, sooner or later, if you're lucky, you become this Obi-Wan. I like being in the Obi-Wan role behind the scenes. I wasn't necessarily prepared for it. I'm not sure you can be. You just are what you are. And Flynn is still Jeff. He's got the energy, and Jeff is pushing his limits as much as ever. It's inspirational. I'm pushing my limits if I mow my lawn!

How did you help *Ares* in your Obi-Wan role?
I tried to be a symbol that you can actually survive this experience, that you can make a *Tron* movie and still live to old age. It isn't necessarily lethal. Then it's consulting, where less is more. I am, in my heart, still a writer/director, even though my role is as a producer. I'm basically 75 years old, and these films should be generational. I feel good about passing the torch. I'm not a big proponent of my generation hanging on ad nauseam to the bitter end. Like, who needs a president in their eighties?

Technology has come a long way since 1982.

Jeff Bridges makes his return as Kevin Flynn.

Light Cycles have been adapted for the real world.

Flynn. This includes Olivia Wilde's Quorra, Garrett Hedlund's Sam Flynn and Cillian Murphy's Dillinger Jr. "These things are not only creative choices; sometimes actors don't want to be in it anymore," Rønning says. "There are different ways of looking at that, but I think the story fell into a place where we felt that we didn't need the old characters to be front and centre. We wanted to take this into a new direction while, at the same time, honouring the universe that we're in."

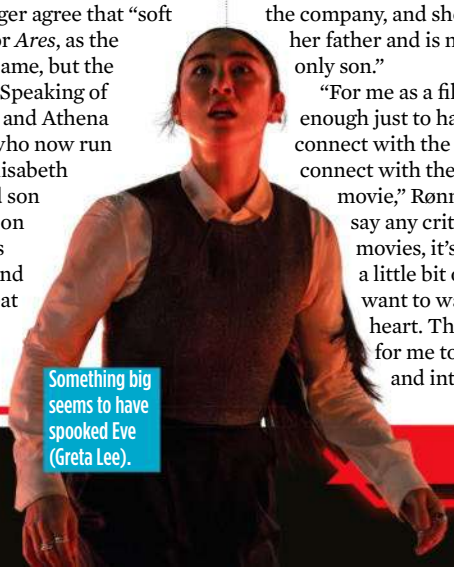
"We're telling a story that's 14 years later, and the most important thing is that we tell this new story in a way that works," adds Springer. "To just throw cameos in, where it's a parade of people that we love from this franchise, I just feel like it's fan service that doesn't serve the story. But we are definitely focused on ways to surprise the audience.

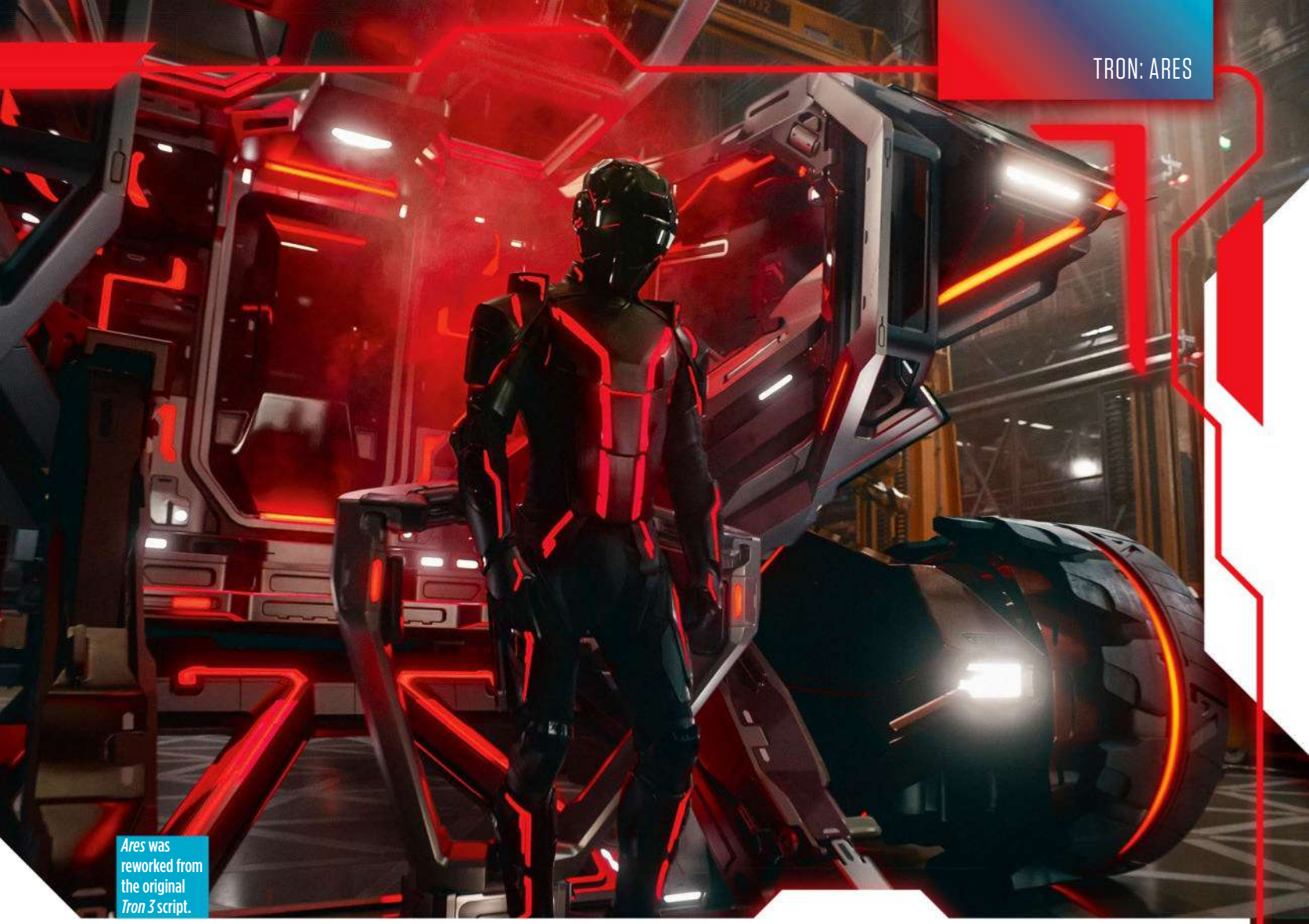
"If we don't touch something in this movie, I always think about where else we can play. I produced the animated series [*Tron: Uprising*] and I worked on the theme park rides. There are all sorts of different ways to keep the mythology alive, whether that be in a film or a series or whatever, if we're so lucky."

NAILED IT

Both Rønning and Springer agree that "soft reboot" is a good term for *Ares*, as the mythology remains the same, but the characters are different. Speaking of which, joining Ares, Eve and Athena are two new Dillingers who now run their family company: Elisabeth and Julian, a mother and son played by Gillian Anderson and Evan Peters. "It feels interesting to try to ground this sci-fi world with great actors in surprising roles," Springer says. "Julian has taken Elisabeth's role as CEO, but she's still around the company, and she's seen the sins of her father and is now seeing it in her only son."

"For me as a filmmaker, it's not enough just to have action; I need to connect with the characters, I need to connect with the emotional core of the movie," Rønning says. "If I should say any critique of the previous movies, it's that I feel they lacked a little bit of heart, and I don't want to watch a movie without heart. That was very important for me to get that into the story and into the movie."


Something big seems to have spooked Eve (Greta Lee).



Ares was reworked from the original *Tron 3* script.

That heart, he expands, comes from Ares discovering that he's "playing for the wrong team" and watching him discover the world for the first time, almost like a newborn. "As an audience, hopefully you will see the world a little differently when you see it through his eyes," Rønning says. "For Eve, she's coming out of a deep tragedy that she has to learn to cope with. She's given up in many ways until she meets Ares, and together they discover life and humanity."

One word used by the filmmakers a few times when discussing *Ares* is "gritty", in terms of both the look and sound of the movie. "I wanted it to feel gritty, and that's why I was so happy when Nine Inch Nails came on board [to do the soundtrack]," Rønning says. "I feel that the combination of my vision with their music was such a perfect match, and I think we drew inspiration from each other. I certainly did. It was clear when we were shooting that they were going to do the music, so I was just listening to old Nine Inch Nails tracks, getting into the mood, and that definitely tweaked the film towards being slightly darker and grittier. I always wanted it to feel industrialised. I wanted to play up the contrast between the grid and the real world, the artificial and real."

Nine Inch Nails have big shoes to fill; Wendy Carlos' pioneering soundtrack accompanied the original 1982 movie, while Daft Punk created Grammy-nominated tracks for *Tron: Legacy*. "The bar was very high. [Daft Punk's] soundtrack has become one with that movie," Rønning says. "One of the first things we talked about was, 'Who's going to make the music?'. When I told people I was making the next *Tron*, the first question out of everybody was, 'Who's making the music?'. We had an extremely short list, with [Oscar-winning composers and members of Nine Inch Nails] Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross at the top."

> **"We wanted to take this into a new direction while honouring the universe that we're in"**

An executive at Disney suggested that Rønning should just ask the duo if they were available, and they came back a day later in the affirmative – only they wouldn't be working as their usual duo, but as the band. "I've loved working with them, and I'm still working with them every day now. It's been a different process working with a band, because usually it's a very collaborative thing, but here I felt like I wanted to take the back seat, to give them the movie and say, 'What do you want to do with it?'. I can't always keep my mouth shut, but I tried to be very respectful of them as artists and of them as a band, creating their music for this. It's been such an amazing, fascinating process. It's a joy, it puts a big smile on my face."

Back in Vancouver, we have one more set to visit: a white-hued room with a variety of arcade machines, some stacked on each other. Though no one will say, *SFX* suspects this is Flynn's digital home, and another reminder of Tron's long legacy. Could that continue beyond *Ares*? "That all depends on the success of this movie, very simple," says Rønning.

Springer, having been through this before, is more optimistic: "I've been with Tron across all different forms of media for a long time. That's why this one matters so much, because it's taken 14 years to happen, so we have got to get it right. It's about seeding opportunities that can play across different platforms, and it could be for future movies, but no one is thinking like, 'Let's hold that idea for the next one.' It is about creating a universe where there are opportunities for the story to move forward – or sideways – in success."

Tron: Ares is in cinemas from 10 October.

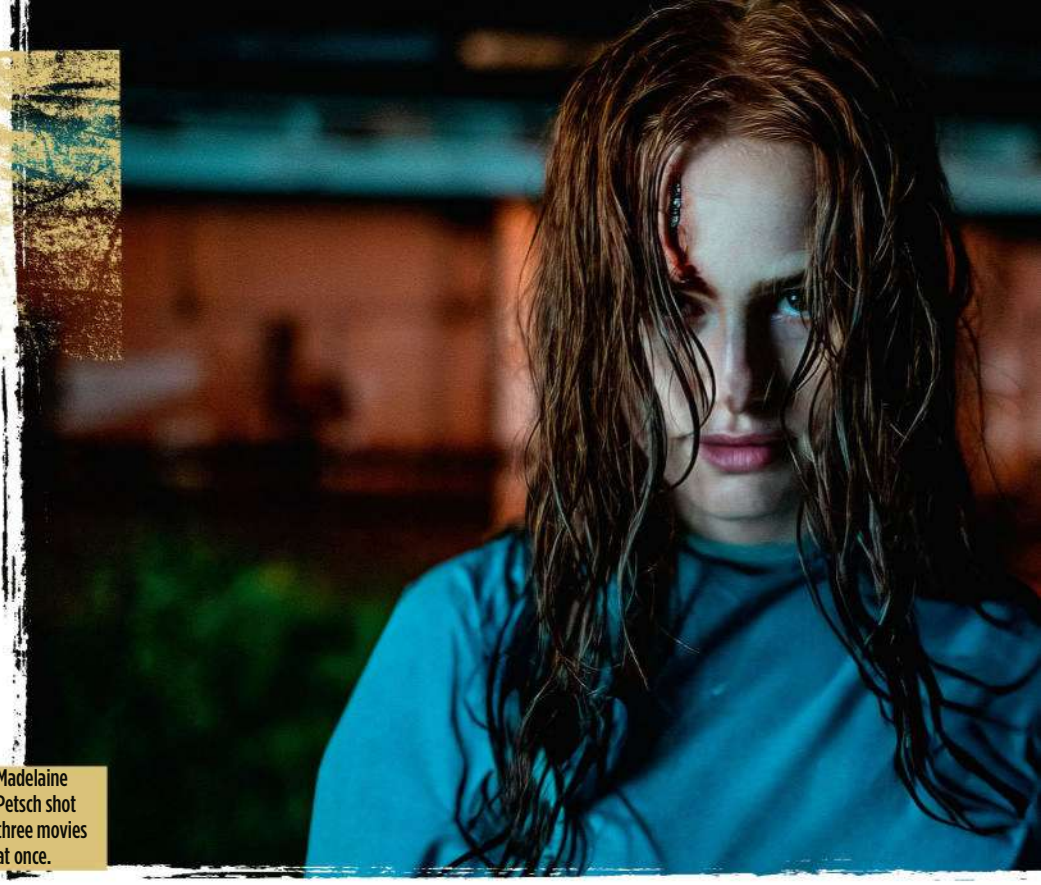
NEVER
TRUST

WORDS:
ROBBIE DUNLOP

STRANGER

THE STAKES ARE RAISED IN RENNY HARLIN'S ALL-NEW HORROR SEQUEL, THE STRANGERS: CHAPTER 2

LIONSGATE / EVERETT COLLECTION/ALAMY



Madelaine Petsch shot three movies at once.

WHEN *SFX* LAST SPOKE TO director Renny Harlin, he was gearing up for the release of *The Strangers: Chapter 1*, his remake of Bryan Bertino's 2008 home invasion horror sleeper hit. Sixteen months later, he concedes that the film struggled to step out from the shadow of its predecessor.

"It was frustrating, but it was exactly what we expected," he says. "I can't think of any movie ever that's been remade, and people say, 'Great thing that you remade it,' and 'It's even better than the original.' I love the original. We all love the original Bertino movie."

For Harlin, the lure was the opportunity to push the story forward through two more films. "To do what we, as movie fans and filmmakers dreamt of – which is, okay, what if it didn't end there? What if one person survived and we followed them? I would have this incredible opportunity of doing, in essence, a four-and-a-half-hour movie about these characters.

"We knew that it came with the curse of having to start by remaking the first movie – and getting murdered by the original fans!"

HORROR HOSPITAL

That curse is lifted in *Chapter 2*, which picks up the following day with Maya (Madelaine Petsch) recovering in hospital under the watch of the local sheriff's department. Needless to say, her respite is short-lived. The Strangers – their killing spree now the talk of the town – soon track her down.

Wearing only a hospital gown, Maya is pursued through the hospital's deserted corridors from the ward down to the morgue. The white-knuckle sequence inevitably recalls a certain horror sequel. Harlin laughs; it's not the first time he's heard the comparison.

"People have seen the trailer. At conventions and when I've met friends, everybody says, 'Okay, was *Halloween II* an inspiration?', and my completely honest answer is that I had, of course, *seen* the movie, but I had completely forgotten it. I had to really turn to my producers and say, like, 'Wait a minute, was Jamie Lee Curtis in a hospital?' Then we went back, and we were like, 'Oh my god, that's totally true.' So I would say it must have come from our subconscious. It's a great movie," Harlin adds, "and I hope we pay homage to it in a good way."

Hospital proves far from a place to recover.

In a car with strangers – but are they the Strangers?

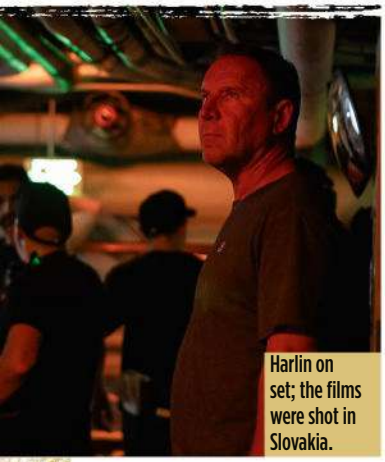
Now left to fend for herself after the brutal climax of *Chapter 1*, Petsch takes centre stage in a sequel that plays out as a relentless game of cat and mouse. "She's in almost every scene of all three movies, and we shot them in, like, 53 or 54 days," says Harlin, noting that Petsch endured "a lot of bruises, a lot of cuts and sore ribs" along the way.

The production schedule posed its own difficulties for Petsch. With the films shot back-to-back and out of sequence, she had to keep careful track of her character's place – and persona – in the unfolding story. "Monday morning we are shooting *Chapter 2*; Monday afternoon we are shooting *Chapter 1*; Tuesday morning we are shooting *Chapter 3*," Harlin says. "So she had to always be able to find her mindset. What is she going through now? Is she seeing or hearing the killers for the first time, or is she now trying to turn the tables and knows their tricks? What is her emotional state? Is she having a breakdown? Is she a little bit scared? Is she completely desperate?"

It required meticulous planning, with the makeup and props teams ensuring every detail stayed consistent. "If you shoot things *so* out of order and if you pour out everything in every scene – you're screaming in every scene, you're crying in every scene, you're running in every scene – then the movie just feels like the same thing over and over again, over the three movies. Then, just physically, she has to do tons of stuff, whether it's running or crawling or climbing or fighting," Harlin adds. "It's very draining both physically and mentally."

STRANGER DANGER

One of the film's eeriest moments – and one Harlin proudly claims credit for – finds Maya, still on the run, climbing into a car with four young strangers. "Of course, you should never stop cars on strange roads, but she does," the director laughs. Wedged between two of them on the back seat, Maya notices a smiley-face tattoo on the neck of one passenger (Gabriel Basso) – disturbingly similar to the mask worn



Harlin on set; the films were shot in Slovakia.

by the killer known as Scarecrow. Could these be her pursuers? It's a question that has fuelled plenty of online speculation since the trailer dropped.

"She's just sitting there looking at these people, and they're staring at her, and her paranoia starts taking over," Harlin says, adding that it could happen to anybody, whether on a subway or in an airport. "If you really start looking at people, and they look at you, you can start to feel paranoid about what they're thinking."

Overcome by paranoia, Maya hallucinates the strangers' faces as those of her masked pursuers. "I loved the idea of having this pressure cooker where the rain is pounding, the windshield wipers are screeching, and this weird religious person is talking on the car radio, and the temperature is just rising, rising, rising... until it explodes."

DEEP TROUBLE

Why Renny Harlin prefers to make a movie with bite

© WARNER BROS ENTERTAINMENT

For many film fans, Renny Harlin will always be the man behind cult shark attack thriller *Deep Blue Sea*. Just don't expect him to bite at a sequel.

"They already did sort of like rip-off versions," he says with a shrug, referring to Warner Brothers' two direct-to-video follow-ups. "I've never seen any of them, but they felt very low-budget and so and so. I think they kind of... I don't know, it felt like they sold it cheap. So I'm done with it."

But Harlin hasn't shaken his fascination with the ocean's deadliest predators. His next film, *Deep Water* (set for release early in 2026) dives headlong into shark territory once more, this time set against what he calls "maybe the biggest airplane crash sequence ever filmed".

"It's a very big, epic movie – a callback to 1970s disaster movies," he says. "It's like my *Poseidon Adventure*, but with a plane in the ocean. The survivors think they are lucky until they realise that they are surrounded by sharks, and then it becomes kind of like the USS Indianapolis story in *Jaws*. It's a very big canvas with a big cast of characters, and it's very emotional. I honestly think it's a very good movie. I'm tremendously excited."

For Harlin, the sequence underlines a simple idea: anyone could be a Stranger. "It could be your family member, someone you work with, or even a person you pass in a café," he says. "You never know. Serial killers can look completely normal."

Another of the trailer's more explosive teases is from a set-piece in which a vehicle flips on a roadside. Harlin, whose action pedigree includes *Die Hard 2* and *Cliffhanger*, says he relishes the challenge of staging large-scale practical stunts. "It's in my blood. I try to stay away from CGI as much as possible and do things in the more traditional and physical way. When I get to roll a car or do something else like that, it's in my DNA; I love doing that. I feel there's no reason why you can't have that bigger event in a horror film as well."

Then there's a scene that audiences *won't* have seen in the trailer, one that leaps completely out of left field. "I have not seen the movie with an audience, so I have no idea how people will take it," Harlin admits. "Because it is kind of an outlandish concept, that there is this sequence. But that's what I also think is the beauty of the horror genre, that you can break the rules; you can do things that use your imagination and surprise the audience. That's the great advantage and pleasure."

WARNER BROS/VILLAGE ROADSHOW/KOBAL/SHUTTERSTOCK

Having escaped once, Maya is not giving up.

HOPE AND PREY

A driving force behind the Strangers' onslaught is that for the first time, their prey has managed to get away. "The fact that Maya survived gave them an impetus to pull out all the stops and go after her," Harlin explains. "That, of course, leads to the [spoiler!] scene. You start seeing that Maya also is changing. She's not just a damsel in distress, but she's starting to change."

Expanding the *Strangers* universe has given Harlin the opportunity to focus on its masked killers – Dollface, Pin-up Girl and Scarecrow – as never before. The move was driven in part by audience reaction to *Chapter 1*. "The beauty of it was that the studio was so happy with the success of the first movie that they said, 'Okay, is there anything else you want to do with the next one?' And we said, 'Yes, absolutely.' We learned from the feedback what the strengths were, and other things the audience wished they could explore more. They wanted to know more about the Strangers."

Chapter 2 delivers on that, delving into, as Harlin puts it, "what makes them tick," largely through flashbacks to childhood moments. "We're not going to say, 'Oh, this kid had a bad dad who was an alcoholic,' or 'This kid didn't have enough toys,'" he stresses. "We're not going to break the unwritten rule of the *Strangers* universe, which is that there is no rhyme or reason to their crimes. But we are going to show what they did when they were little, and it's kind of a natural continuation of what they are doing now. That was definitely something that came from the response to the first movie."

The reshoots, which explored more of Maya's arc and her slow transformation, stretched over several days and incorporated fresh scenes for *Chapter 3*. "It was just great to have the studio's support," Harlin says. "Of course, when you have something that is successful, then it's much easier to convince them to let you go and play a little more."

> **"You start seeing that Maya also is changing. She's not just a damsel in distress"**

The *Strangers* saga – set across four days – is set to conclude next year. "If we say that the first movie was a home invasion movie and the second is a town invasion movie, then the third is really going to go in very surprising directions," Harlin says.

But will this *really* be the end for the masked intruders? Could the franchise grow into a quadrilogy – or beyond? "I was talking to one of the heads of the studio at a convention the other day. I said, 'I'm already excited about the third one coming out,' and he said, 'I'm excited about the next *six* ones we are making after this!' So, I would say yes," he laughs.

Maybe this time, opening the door won't be such a bad thing.

The Strangers: Chapter 2 is in cinemas from 26 September.

DEVIL'S BARGAIN

DIRECTOR JUSTIN TIPPING REVEALS HOW HIS PERSONAL EXPERIENCES MADE HIM THE RIGHT PERSON TO TELL HIM

WORDS:
TARA BENNETT

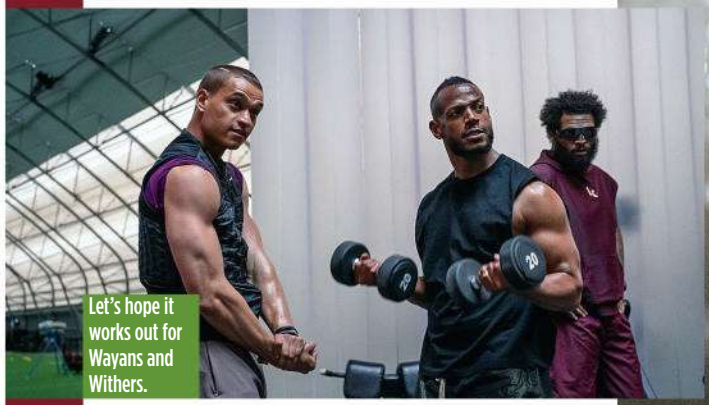
FOR ANYONE WHO'S become desperately passionate about something in their life – be it career, improving their physique or just geeky collecting – very often a tipping point is met where the pursuit could easily devolve into obsession. If you've ever fallen down your own rabbit hole and maybe break into a cold sweat thinking about it, Justin Tipping wants you to know that he gets it, and he's got just the movie for you.

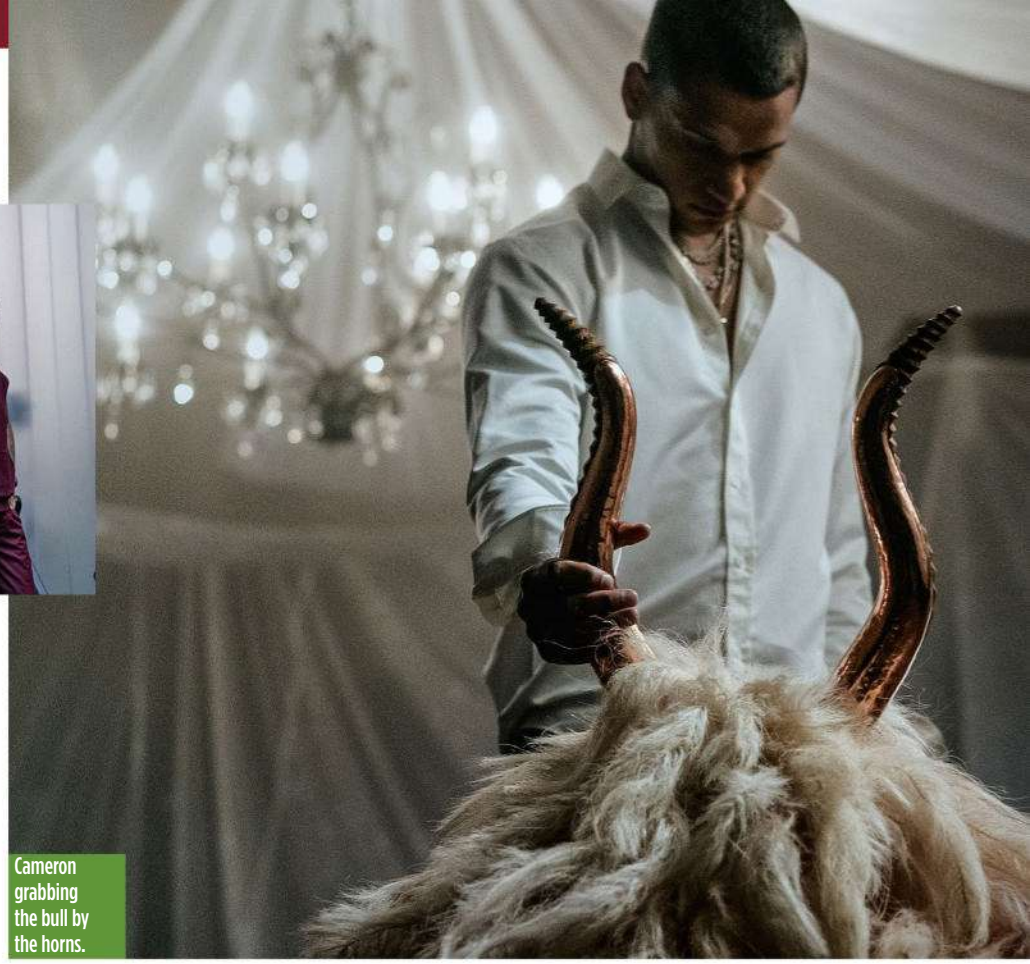
HIM is Tipping's second feature film, a psychological horror made in conjunction with Jordan Peele's Monkeypaw Productions. It was conceived by screenwriters Zack Akers and Skip Bronkie in their acclaimed script, originally titled Goat, whose premise revolved around a tense sports retreat, with an up-and-coming young athlete invited to train with an American football team's close-to-retirement star player. It was optioned by Peele's company in 2022; they brought in Tipping, who they'd met in 2017.

Tipping first burst onto Hollywood's radar in 2016 with his directorial debut *Kicks*, a film about an Oakland, California, teen who gets beaten and robbed for his vintage Air Jordans, then goes on a mission to get them back. Its success opened the door for Tipping to direct on multiple TV dramas, from *Run The World* to *Joe vs Carole*, until the pandemic shut everything down and afforded him a much-needed creative reset.

"*Kicks* and then TV streaming all had taken off, and I had student loans and all the things," Tipping explains to *SFX* about his reasons for grinding from series to series. "By the last show I did, I just got burnt out. Myself and, like, the entire world was having a unified moment of questioning, how do we spend our time? We're reminded of our mortality and all those things, and I ended up taking some time off. It was the cliché: the most money I'm making, but now also the most depressed I've been. I did some soul searching and rediscovered what brought me joy."

Tipping says his heart led him back to filmmaking. "I was ready to do another film, and literally at that moment of being prepared to write another original and make another indie, this project came my way," he says of the serendipity of this project. "Monkeypaw approached me and asked, 'Do you want to pitch on this?'" →


Let's hope it works out for Wayans and Withers.


Cameron grabbing the bull by the horns.

He did, and says he immediately found it to be an incredible character piece. "Everything's there. It's almost like *Nosferatu* or *Ex Machina*, which are very contained and very simple... just with two quarterbacks," he says of its American football backdrop. "It was a genre mashup I'd never seen."

PLAYING BALL

The competitive world of sports also called to him because soccer was his first passion. "'Ball' was my first word," he says. "I was the most athletic of my senior class, and then halfway through college I gave up soccer and pursued film. I became a film projectionist and found this new love. So for all those things, I knew this [story] in my *bones* and how to tell it."

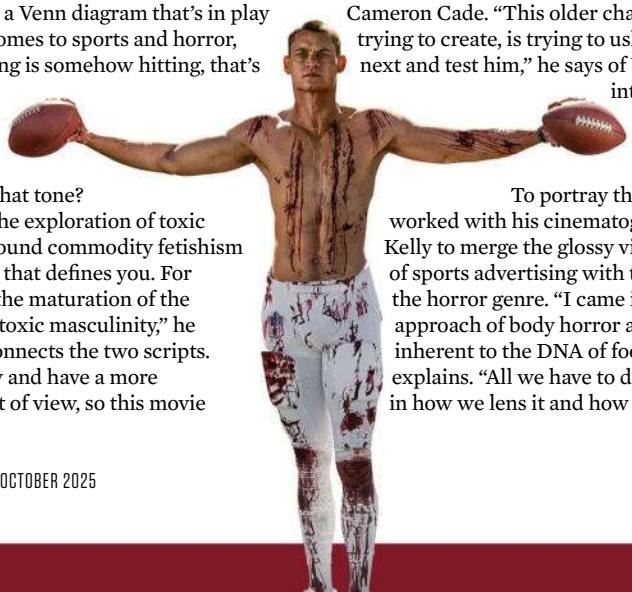
Having already burned himself out professionally, Tipping says that, mixed with his former sporting life, gave him particular insight into what *HIM* was saying. "Whether you're a writer or you make music, you can get very solipsistic and lost in a world of, 'No, but I *have* to do this,'" he says of the pitfalls of some passions. "At a certain point, it's like, how many birthdays and weddings and weekends did you miss, thinking that if you *just* sacrificed that time, it would somehow prove something? Ultimately, I think that's a myth I want to debunk. You don't need to be an asshole to be great at something."

He went to Monkeypaw with a visual reel referencing eclectic films like *The Holy Mountain* from Alejandro Jodorowsky, Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* and Carpenter's *Halloween*. "I told them right off the bat I felt like there's a Venn diagram that's in play here when it comes to sports and horror, and if everything is somehow hitting, that's like a new language," he says of his pitch. "So how do you create that tone?

"*Kicks* was the exploration of toxic masculinity around commodity fetishism and this object that defines you. For me, *HIM* was the maturation of the exploration of toxic masculinity," he says of what connects the two scripts. "I'm older now and have a more definitive point of view, so this movie is about what happens when the athlete *is* the commodity and the institution is moving their body around as disposable."

Tipping says Monkeypaw producers Peele, Ian Cooper and Kate Oh got behind his ideas, which now more directly tie in America's tendency to employ a militaristic approach within its professional sports teams which is all about "breaking" their talent. "In terms of American football, it's actually modelled after war," he explains. "The generals are the coaches, and the soldiers are unified and move together and seem as one, which requires the stripping down of ego and the individual in creating the perfect soldier, or creating the perfect teammate in this very ritualistic thing."

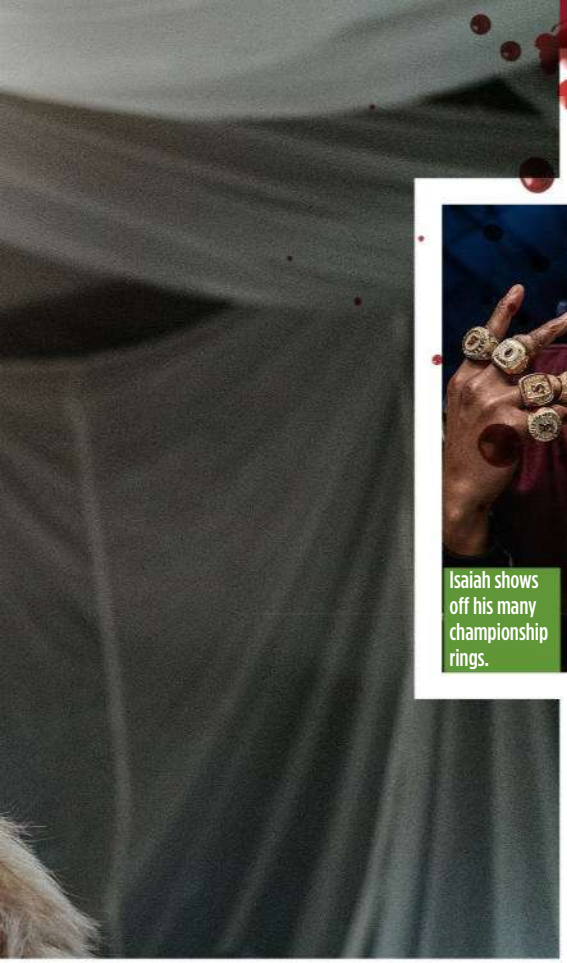
Tipping says that after some of his own script tweaking, that dynamic is personified in the two-hander dynamic between superstar and eight-time Championship quarterback Isaiah White and rising star quarterback Cameron Cade. "This older character is trying to create, is trying to usher in the next and test him," he says of White's intent. "It's about creating the perfect soldier."



To portray that, Tipping worked with his cinematographer Kira Kelly to merge the glossy visual language of sports advertising with the visuals of the horror genre. "I came in with the approach of body horror as a subgenre inherent to the DNA of football," he explains. "All we have to do is show it in how we lens it and how we approach it. In my mind, if the quarterback is going to pull back to throw, how do you frame the throw? You could recreate an image that is Michael Myers pulling back a knife. If all of those net out in the experience of the movie, suddenly you're subconsciously infusing horror language into sports."

SCARY MOVIE

Forefront in his mind once he was on board was hiring his Isaiah and Cameron, who would have to carry the film on their shoulders. For the elder athlete, he says, Marlon Wayans's name immediately came up. "I've been a fan forever," he says with clear respect. "I've known from *Requiem For A Dream* that he



Isaiah shows off his many championship rings.

Tipping with Peele and the film's leading men.

Whatever the hell that is, it's creepier than Gunnersaurus.

had the range and the dramatic chops, and I don't think he's ever really been given his flowers or afforded the opportunity to be a leading man in that context.

"As a fun little anecdote," Tipping asides, "I got jumped in a movie theatre parking lot over some Nikes, and that's what inspired *Kicks*. After I got jumped, my machismo was like, 'I'll just see the movie', even though I'm bleeding and messed up. I saw *Scary Movie* with Marlon, so I think I trauma-bonded with him on a quantum level," he chuckles.

Tipping says he made a personal casting plea to Wayans in the form of a letter. "I told him my story, and I told him that story," he says of the beating. "When we met up after that, he laughed and said something like, "Well, you're welcome. I'm glad you got jumped because here we are!"

The director says that he can't wait for audiences to discover even more facets of Wayans's prodigious talents through his portrayal of Isaiah White. "It was a healing experience for all of us, including Marlon, just where we were all at in our lives," he muses. "He had lost so many people after COVID, and his parents, and was starting a new chapter in his entertainment career. All that honesty was put on screen. One of the things I'm most excited to see is what happens with Marlon's trajectory, because I think people are gonna be blown away.

> **"For me, HIM was the maturation of the exploration of toxic masculinity"**

"Then there's Tyriq Withers," he says of his Cameron. "With Tyriq, we're witnessing the birth of a star." Tipping says he first became aware of Withers due to his standout guest role in the series *Atlanta*. "I went to his Instagram and saw a behind-the-scenes video of him giving a speech after they wrapped to the cast and crew, about how thankful he was, and it was like, 'Oh, that's *you*, and that's the character.' In that moment I was like, 'This is the young Cameron Cade.'"

However, Withers was so new to the casting world, the studios were worried whether he could co-carry a movie *and* hold up against Wayans. "I made it a point to put him on tape and worked with him," Tipping says of how he fought for the actor. "As soon as we put that tape in front of everybody, they were like, '*Oh.*'

"Tyriq was a super-intense soccer player who did one year of high-school football in his senior year," Tipping says of the actor's sports background. "Off that year, I think he got offered a scholarship and then ultimately played for Florida State football, which is one of *the* best football programs. So there was something grounding that he could bring to the character, like this could be the next great but also bring humility to it."

His lack of major roles also allowed Tipping to capture the actor on camera experiencing what Cameron is supposed to be experiencing in real time. "He hadn't been around celebrity, and this was the first time he's entering that world of politics, egos and limelight," the director reflects. "It made sense he was going to experience that while making the movie, so you're gonna see and feel some very honest reactions and performances."

Tipping says making *HIM* was a return to his own passion. He knows it's tough for original horror to break through in cinemas, but he believes that Peele's input and Monkeypaw's support have ensured the film is something audiences will *get*.

"There's a universality in the specifics of the film which makes it more than just a football movie," he says. "But what's also exciting is working with Monkeypaw, because they have that special sauce that it can be entertaining, a popcorn movie, reach a global audience, but still somehow inject social commentary and criticism."

Asked what he hopes audiences take away from *HIM*, Tipping muses, "The emotional acts of characters are built around what a character wants and what they need, and if they don't get what they need, it can result in tragedy. By the end of this movie, you can decide if these characters ultimately got what they needed... or what they wanted."

Like Cameron, Withers was pushed to his limit.

HIM is in cinemas 19 September (US) and 3 October (UK).

WORDS:
DAVE GOLDER

IT'S SOPHOMORE YEAR FOR THE SUPER-POWERED STUDENTS OF GEN V, AND *THE BOYS*' UNIVERSE OVERSEER ERIC KRIPKE PROMISES *SFX* TENTACLED ANUSES, HIGHER STAKES AND A NEW DEAN DESTINED TO BREAK THE INTERNET

DON'T NEED NO EDUCATION

WHEN YOUR INTERVIEW contains – within the first two minutes – the phrase, "If we're talking about the same anus..." there's a good chance you're talking to Eric Kripke about one of the shows in the ever-expanding, ever-grosser, ever-more-MAGA-baiting universe of *The Boys*.

In this case we're discussing season two of *Gen V*, the spin-off centring on a bunch of super-powered teens attending the shady Vought-run Godolkin University. As anyone who's seen the first season knows, this is no cosy *Harry Potter* for capes – the series is every bit as gory and bitingly satirical as its potty-mouthed progenitor. Hell, one main character, Marie, is basically a blood-themed variation on Magneto, and that's always going to end quite messily.

Kripke, the man overseeing the whole *The Boys* universe, promises that things are only going to get wilder with season two. So how is the show going to gross us all out this time round? "Lovingly," laughs Kripke, refusing to give away spoilers. But it's all done for the →

Showrunner Michele Fazekas (third from left).

right reasons, he assures us. "Gen V definitely has its hilarious and shocking moments, but all of it serves the story."

So the exploding anus we see in the trailer isn't gratuitous, then?

"If we're talking about the same anus – which is something we often say on this show – that's a tentacled anus. Yeah, that comes up pretty early in the season, actually..."

WORLD AFFAIRS

Season two of *Gen V* not only continues the story from the first season of this show, but is also our first glimpse into the new, horrifying socio-political status quo established at the end of *The Boys* season four.

To jog your memories, *Gen V* season one ended with two students, Cate (power: can compel people to do what she wants by touching them) and Sam (power: super strength) freeing a load of supes from an underground experimental lab, who then summarily slaughtered all non-powered people at Godolkin.

However, owing to an unfortunate misunderstanding, the good-guy students Marie (power: blood manipulation), Andre (power: teen Magneto), Jordan (power: gender swapping) and Emma (power: shrinks when she purges or cries) are blamed for the slaughter and are imprisoned.

Meanwhile, in *The Boys*, Homelander (thanks to the machinations of Sister Sage) installs a puppet president in the White House, who declares martial law, with Homelander and his super-cronies in charge of security. Most of the Boys are captured but Starlight manages to go on the run (and will be making a guest appearance in season two of *Gen V*, along with the Deep).

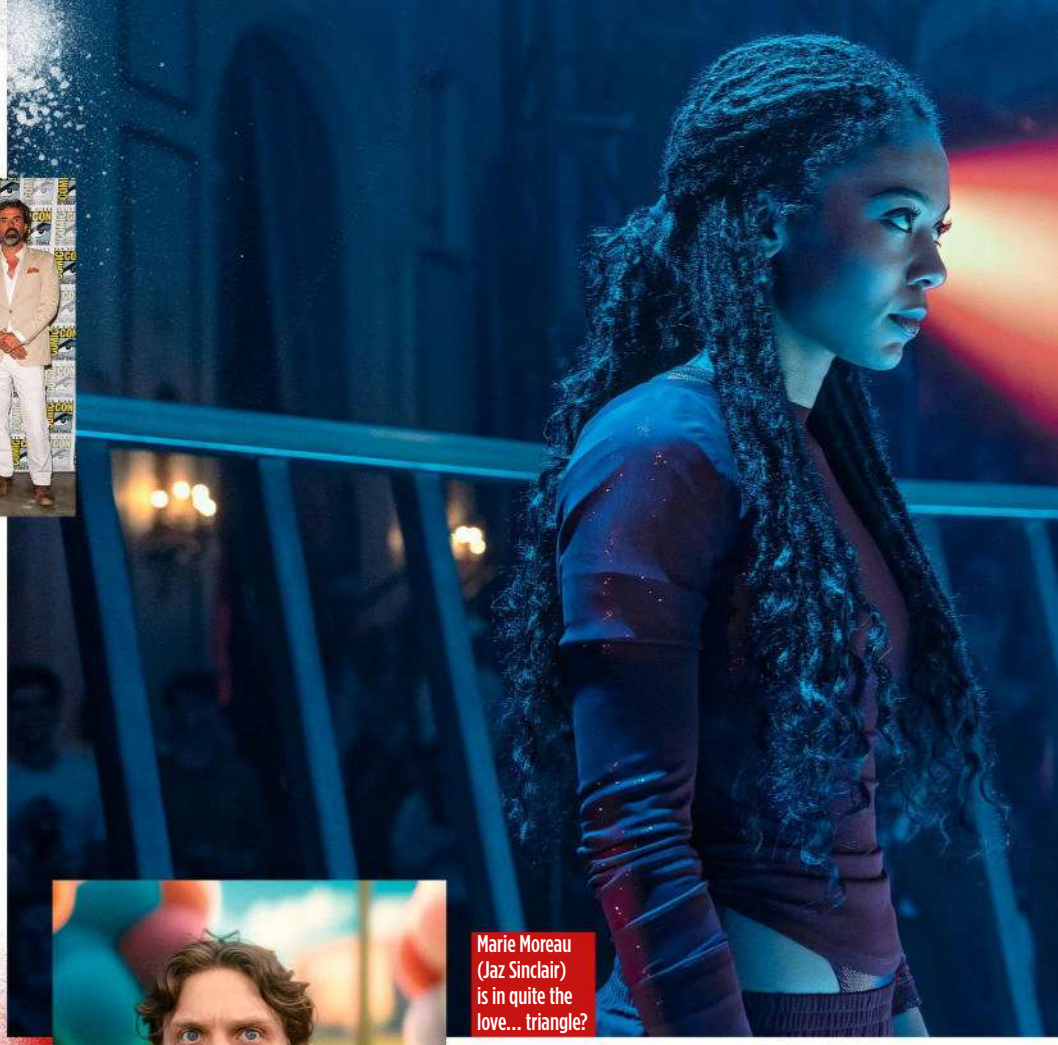
"We're just trying to make this funhouse mirror of what we see going on in the States," says Kripke. "Coming off of the season four finale of *The Boys*, *Gen V* is our first real solid peek into how Homelander has changed the world, referencing just what is happening out there in the world, ever since he took over the country – and also where Starlight is, and what's going on with the Starlighters, and what's going on in media.

"I love that each show is its own show – they each have their own story – but because they all exist in the same world, you can really spread consistent and interesting details throughout them.

"You just have that much more room to let the world evolve, which is really exciting. So the world [in *Gen V* season two] is kinda fucked, but then again, so is our world. So it all checks out."

Kripke thinks viewers will also notice a subtle shift in tone on the second season of *Gen V*. "A lot of it is intentional," he says. "Season two has higher stakes. It's a little bit of a darker show. The characterisations are a little bit more complicated. Michele Fazekas as the showrunner, and her whole team, they really

> **"Season two is just a lot more confident, and it knows what it is and it takes bigger swings"**



Marie Moreau (Jaz Sinclair) is in quite the love... triangle?

Sam (Asa Germann) unleashed the supes.

Cate (Maddie Phillips): butter wouldn't melt.

Jordan (London Thor): likewise...

learned a lot from season one about what worked and what didn't work. Season two is just a lot more confident, and it knows what it is and it takes some bigger swings.

"Part of that is just the sense of discovery on every television show. Season two of *The Boys* is better than season one of *The Boys*. This show is just really starting to find itself. With that, you just get a lot more depth and complexity, and shocks and twists and just deeper levels of everything."

As with any show involving teens in an educational arena – sci-fi or not – an element of teen romance crept its way into season one, though with *The Boys*-style twists. Marie, for example, fell for Jordan, a character who had time-share on a body with a girl called Emma. We're not quite sure there's a letter for that relationship on the LGBTQ spectrum yet, but Kripke assures us they will be exploring that romance further.

"We really embrace what's different about this show, which is its college setting. It's got younger characters. They're dealing with the issues that people that age and in that place would deal with. Because the last thing we want to do is make another show that's just exactly like *The Boys*. We want something that's recognisably in the universe, but also has a bit of its own energy."

Another change to season two was forced on the production team by tragic circumstances: the shocking death of Chance Perdomo (who played Andre in season one) in a motorcycle accident. Kripke hopes they have honoured the actor in a fitting manner. For a start, the entire season has been dedicated to him.

"It was brutal and tragic," recalls Kripke. "He was so talented and so young. There was all he had to give the world, and now he can't. The pain that it causes his friends and his loved ones and his family is the real tragedy.

"Sure, it was hard to revamp and rework the first half of the season in a short period of time – because he passed away right before shooting. So that was really hard and hectic. But it pales in comparison to a single minute of what his mother is going through.

"I always kept that in mind. I have kids, and as crazy and difficult as that time was, what we went through as the writers – that's not real life. What his family is dealing with is real life. All we're doing is changing words on paper. You have to keep that in perspective.

"We really wanted to honour him by honouring the character in the show. We didn't recast, we didn't try to replace him. There's a lot of due respect paid to what a hero his character was. A lot of what our heroes do this year as a tribute to Andre is really a tribute to Chance."

DREAM DEAN

One major new character this season is Godolkin's new Dean, aka Dean Cipher, whose powers are rumoured to be icky in true *The Boys* style. Kripke is giving nothing away, but he is full of praise for the actor bringing him to life.

"Hamish Linklater is so great. I was such a huge fan of his from *Midnight Mass*. He blew me away in that. Every single line reading that comes out of that guy's mouth is so interesting and unexpected and funny and menacing and weird – he's everything you want in an antagonist. I can't wait for people to see Dean Cipher."

Then there's also going to be a song and dance routine... "I don't want to spoil that!" says Kripke. "I will never miss an opportunity to put a musical number in the show. So when this came up, I was a dog with a bone. There's a part of me – hey, I'll confess, man – that thinks I should just go ahead and make a musical. I think it's so funny and great when people start dancing in unison. It's so insane."

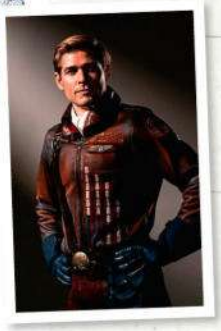
That's what he thinks is insane in a show containing tentacled anuses?

Gen V is on Prime Video from 29 September.

RISING TO THE OCCASION

Eric Kripke explains the design ethos behind the supersuits for *The Boys*' upcoming prequel, *Vought Rising*

The first images for the '50s-set prequel series *Vought Rising* were recently released, showing Jensen Ackles (*Supernatural*) as Soldier Boy, Mason Dye (*Stranger Things*) as Bombsight, Will Hochman (*Blue Bloods*) as Torpedo and Elizabeth Posey as Private Angel. Eric Kripke goes into a little more detail about what the supersuit designs reveal about the show, which started shooting mid-August.

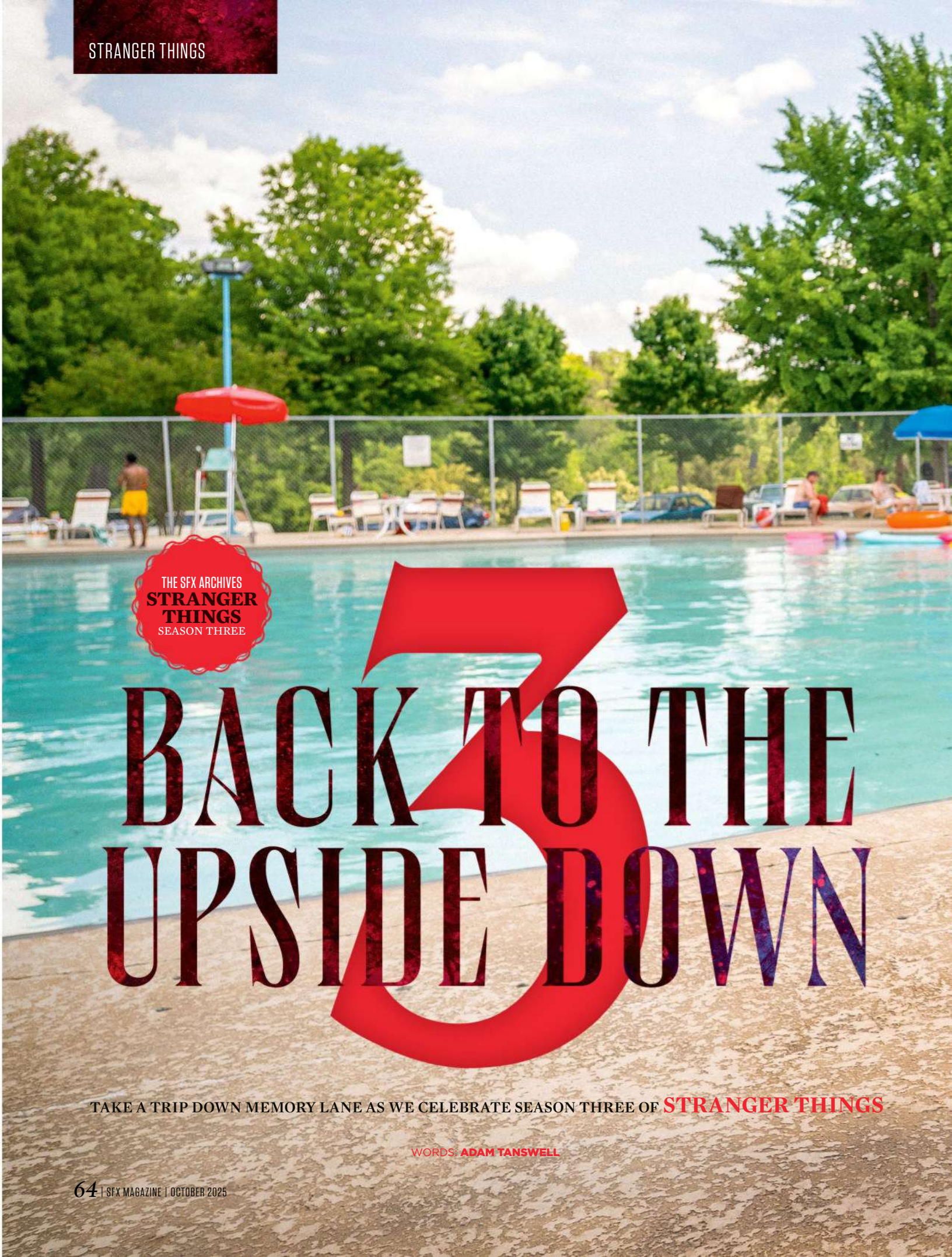


"Laura Jean Shannon and her team, who have designed all the suits on all the shows, have really outdone themselves," he enthuses. "What I love most about those particular suits is that they really have a history. [In the prequel] Vought is not a private company yet, and so it's obvious from the costumes that these characters have been employed by the military, and they come out of World War II.

"You watch their evolution from public service to the private sector, as the suits become more garish, and they start adding fucking capes and all the bells and whistles that the military just wouldn't put on their suits. So it's fun to watch – just visually through what they're wearing – a little bit of an evolution of how the modern supersuit has come to pass.

He goes on to describe *Vought Rising* as, "really fun, sexy, pulpy, '50s," but with a "really modern twisty story too. It's like *LA Confidential* with superheroes."

Welcome Hamish Linklater as Dean Cipher.



THE SFX ARCHIVES
STRANGER THINGS
SEASON THREE

BACK TO THE UPSIDE DOWN

TAKE A TRIP DOWN MEMORY LANE AS WE CELEBRATE SEASON THREE OF **STRANGER THINGS**

WORDS: **ADAM TANSWELL**

SCOOPS
ICE CREAM PARLOR

Ross Duffer, Millie Bobby Brown, Sadie Sink and Matt Duffer.

SEASON THREE THE EPISODE TITLES

CHAPTER ONE
SUZIE, DO YOU COPY?

CHAPTER TWO
THE MALL RATS

CHAPTER THREE
THE CASE OF THE MISSING LIFEGUARD

CHAPTER FOUR
THE SAUNA TEST

CHAPTER FIVE
THE FLAYED

CHAPTER SIX
E PLURIBUS UNUM

CHAPTER SEVEN
THE BITE

CHAPTER EIGHT
THE BATTLE OF STARCOURT

Step into the *SFX* interview archives for exclusive, all-new treats from past seasons of *Stranger Things*. Whether you want behind-the-scenes secrets from the cast and crew, on-set stories from your Hawkins favourites or interviews we've *never* published before, we've got you covered. As the final season of *Stranger Things* draws closer, this is the perfect prep for your upcoming season five binge.

ALL QUOTES AND INTERVIEWS FROM THIS RETROSPECTIVE ARTICLE ARE FROM 2018 AND 2019.

ON 4 JULY 2019, SEASON THREE of *Stranger Things* dropped on Netflix – bringing eight episodes of supernatural scares and Mind Flayer madness to audiences across the globe. For the first time, the story is set in the summer and school's out for the cool kids of Hawkins – but before the show arrives in Indiana, a sinister new location is revealed in the first episode's opening scenes.

The date is 28 June 1984 and the camera pans around a scientific laboratory, complete with intricately masked workers operating a rather elaborate piece of machinery. When the massive machine whirs into action, its powerful laser pierces a hole in a wall – and soon enough, strangely familiar tentacles start to creep out of the cavity...

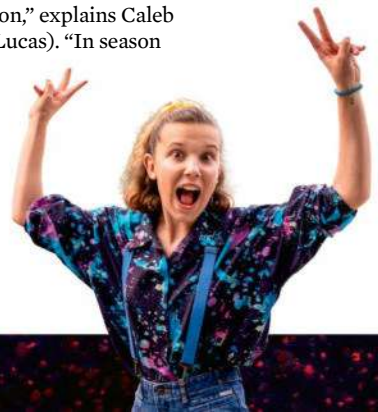
But not for long. A cacophonous malfunction brings the entire process to a halt, brutally slaughtering the personnel in the process. As the camera pans away, it's revealed that the facility is actually a Russian military base – but then the opening credits begin to roll and the action shoots forward a year.

Finally, we are back in Hawkins, where we find Mike (Finn Wolfhard) and Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown) kissing in a typical teenage bedroom. The kids are growing up. Season three of *Stranger Things* has been described as a lot, hot – and horrifying – summer for the bike-riding youngsters we've all come to know and love. When *SFX* is invited back to Atlanta, Georgia, for a snoop around the third season set, we prepare to take copious notes and keep our eyes peeled for the most minute of details. What will we uncover as we wander around EUE/Screen Gems Studios (now known as Cinespace Studios Atlanta) alongside the cast and crew? Bring it on...

RAT'S THE WAY TO DO IT

"It's scary," shrieks Millie Bobby Brown. "It's really, really scary." The Eleven actress is enthusiastically describing the horror of the third season to *SFX*. It's early May 2018 and the first weeks of production are underway in Atlanta. "Look, I love scary things, but this is pretty gruesome," Millie adds. "With each season, the threats get bigger and more evil. This is scarier than ever."

"In season one, the horror was the Demogorgon," explains Caleb McLaughlin (Lucas). "In season two, it was on another level with the Demodogs and the Shadow Monster. In



The Duffers with Priah Ferguson (Erica).

Director Shawn Levy with Noah Schnapp.

Caleb McLaughlin (Lucas, centre).

season three, it's going to be something crazy."

"In my opinion, season two was scarier than season one," continues Sadie Sink (Max). "Each year, it escalates as far as the scariness goes. It's interesting this season because there's going to be a lot about the personal lives of the characters, as well as the supernatural elements."

Doubling down on the horror, the show's production designer Chris Trujillo has a lot of fun introducing the basement set of Brimborn Steel Works during our extended tour of the Atlanta lot. As the door to Stage 5 of Screen Gems Studios creaks open, *SFX* has a first-hand look at the heart of the scares of the season.

"This will be the basement of an abandoned factory in Hawkins," explains Trujillo. "It's a low, dark, dank subterranean level under one of the factory floors. It's where one of our characters gets dragged and it holds the remnants of our Shadow Monster. That's essentially what's going on here. It's reconstituting with organic matter and the beginnings of all of that are here. This is his lair for the first two-thirds of the season. This is where victims are brought."

The vast space is dark, damp and dingy – and perfect for the rat-exploding escapades that are to come in season three. However, Trujillo quickly points out that the above-ground building that stands in for the Steel Works factory is actually a real location nearby.

"It's a real, turn-of-the-century foundry," reveals the production designer. "I think they were building tank parts there during the world wars, so it's a really old building – but we had to build this basement from scratch."

This particular set has taken six weeks to build, from the initial drawings through to completion. "The design of the set's inspired by industrial reality," Trujillo remarks. "We did a lot of research into how these spaces look and how they function, so we tried to be true to all of the plumbing and things like that. This is one of our biggest new stage sets this year. It's one of our big priorities."

THE ONES YOU LOVE

Having seen season three, we now know that there is an underlying theme of possession in the plot – and this factory basement is the start of that story. "When it comes to possession, *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers* was a big movie for us growing up," says Ross Duffer, speaking to *SFX* later in the year. "The original movie (from 1956) and Philip Kaufman's version from the '70s is a great under-seen film with Donald Sutherland. It always scared us. It's this idea that your friends and family, you don't really know who they are. The end of that movie still haunts me."

"In a lot of great horror, even something like *The Shining*, it's about someone you love who turns evil," adds Matt Duffer. "Those are the most upsetting and disturbing films. And they stick with us the most, so we try and capture that feeling."

"This season, alongside the theme of possession, we've also added in little elements of body horror from David Cronenberg," continues Ross, with a telling smirk on his face. That explains the rather grisly exploding rats, then.

The next stop on *SFX*'s studio tour is Stage 2, which houses a lot of the domestic sets – including the Byers home. "Things have calmed down a little for the Byers," explains Trujillo. "They have been able to get back to their relatively normal lives in season three. Everyone is trying to recover from the events of the last season, so the house is as calm and put together as we have ever seen it. It's in a very mellow domestic state with no drawings on the wall and no Christmas lights. It's a recovery phase."

Over the years, the house has experienced a number of updates. "We changed the Byers house a little last year – in the aftermath of the Demogorgon attack of season one," confirms Trujillo. "They got a paint job and the house got a little tidied up, but Joyce (Winona Ryder) is still a struggling single mum."

"Will (Noah Schnapp) does have an Atari now," continues Trujillo, pointing out some of the subtle changes for the third season. "That's new. I think the Byers also have a new TV and VCR, but the Byers house is pretty mellow this year.

"Oh, there's an exciting new refrigerator and Jonathan's (Charlie Heaton) room is a little bit different. He's more into photography because he has a job at *The Hawkins Post* and he is officially into REM, so there are REM posters on the wall." →

Billy (Dacre Montgomery) has a nasty moment.

Mike and Eleven are *definitely* not up to anything.

READ BETWEEN THE LINES

Before the cameras started to roll for season three, a group read-through of the scripts was set up to introduce everyone to the story. "It was really nice to hear the script being said out loud, especially for the Duffers and the writers," admits Sadie Sink. "It was fun. It was good to see all these familiar faces again. It was like a big family reunion of sorts."

LOVE IS IN THE AIR

The shoot for the third season of *Stranger Things* began in April 2018. The cameras stopped rolling in November. "This season is so much fun," reveals Millie Bobby Brown. "Eleven is full of love and she's really excited about her new relationship with Mike. It's such a relatable story."

"So the plan is... we get really, really famous."

Maya Hawke, Joe Keery and Gaten Matarazzo.

Other new domestic sets on the Screen Gems Studio lot for season three include Max's bedroom. "We shot it on location previously, but it was getting inconvenient to go out to where our location was," admits Trujillo. "This year, we built Max's room on a stage here and we are going to build Billy's room, as well as the bathroom from their house. We will have about half of their house on stage this year."

THE CABIN IN THE WOODS

After our extensive tour of Screen Gems Studios is complete, it's time to watch a scene being filmed. We're guided into a sound stage that holds the cabin of Hopper (David Harbour) for what turns out to be one of the earliest scenes in the third season. Hopper is reclining on a sofa, snacking on crisps and drinking beer. He's watching TV while keeping a close eye on Eleven and Mike, who are in the next room.

"They are in the bedroom doing whatever teenagers do, but they are supposed to keep the door open three inches," explains Harbour, talking to *SFX* on set. "Hopper is freaking out. He's stressed about Eleven and he's trying to eat his feelings in front of the TV."

The scene provides a sense of levity and humour to the show, but it's also Hopper's impressive new moustache that brings a smile to our face. "I mean, it's the '80s," chuckles Harbour, pointing at his facial hair. "It's so funny. The moustache thing was my idea because we have a very successful formula, but we are all a bunch of idiots and we want to continue to break the mould and change things up."

The actor quietly pauses for thought: "You know, it's a very different season for Hopper. I don't want to spoil exactly what that involves, but he's a different guy. He has a teenage daughter who is now 14 years old or something. She is going through a lot of changes – and there are teenage boys involved."

Harbour cites *Magnum, PI* and *Smokey And The Bandit* as inspirations for the bushy top lip. "Gerald McRaney in ['80s American crime drama] *Simon & Simon* was another that I remember," recalls Harbour, with a glint in his eye. "But getting back to the scene, the kids are kissing in the bedroom and Hopper bursts in on them at some point, but it's like nothing is happening. They trick him. That's what's going on."

Millie Bobby Brown loves that Eleven is growing up in the show. "Eleven needs to be happy for once because she's been through a whole lot," she explains. "Look, it's the summer of love in season three. Lucas and Max go through their cute relationship – and Mike and Eleven go through their cute relationship. They're dealing with a relationship at such a young age, but it's fun to play that. Plus, Mike and Eleven are made for each other. They are very in love."

"The writers are definitely playing around with this idea of the summer of love," admits Gaten Matarazzo (Dustin) during our 2018 set visit. "Of course, Dustin's still a little heartbroken because he was interested in Max. I think he feels a little bit betrayed since Dustin was much more vocal about it to his friend Lucas (Caleb McLaughlin). I mean, Lucas was always hesitant – but all of a sudden, they're together. I think it hurt Dustin to see them together and he's trying to get over that. But I don't know... Maybe he has a little girlfriend of his own? Maybe he doesn't."

BIG HAIR, DON'T CARE

"Cyndi Lauper. Madonna. Oh, and Michael Jackson's a big one for me." Sadie Sink is reeling off her list of '80s musical faves. "I love the music of the '80s. It's so good! What I don't like about the '80s is the technology, although I guess there's something really nice about not having social media back then."

CHOPPING MALL

While *SFX* chats to the cast and crew at Screen Gems Studios, a talented team of artists and craftspeople are beavering away across the city creating another huge set for season three: Starcourt Mall.

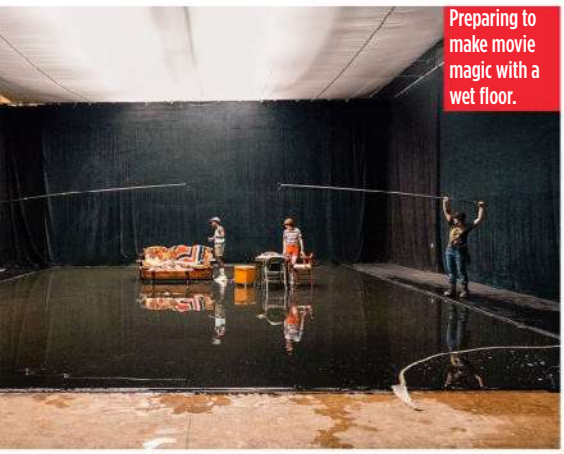
"We have a giant new mall in season three and it's quite an endeavour," admits *Stranger Things* location manager Tony Holley. "The idea and the hope was that we would find a closed-down shopping mall that we could shoot at. Maybe 15 years ago, that would have been possible – but Atlanta's a growing city, so there are no closed-down malls. The one we're shooting at is about 70% shut down. It's called

Props to Noah Schnapp for undergoing those shorts.

Erica does a little light spelunking. And why not.

Noah, Finn and Caleb get some pre-shoot prep.

School's a right laugh for Mike, Nancy and Jonathan.



Preparing to make movie magic with a wet floor.

Gwinnett Place and we have essentially 25% of the mall to work with."

"I'm really excited to see the mall," explains a hyped Gaten Matarazzo. "We haven't seen it yet. We haven't filmed in the mall at all. They say it's an older mall and they completely re-did part of it to make it look like it was in the '80s. I'll be spending a lot of my filming time at the mall, so I'm excited to get there. It's going to be a lot of fun."

"We have taken over two storeys of a mall in Gwinnett County, which is about 40 minutes north of us here," confirms Trujillo. "The mall's been slowly closing, so we took over a whole wing that was perfect for us architecturally.

"We've been working on it for eight weeks or so. We completely gutted it and restored all the facades and interiors of the stores, as well as the food court and its fountains. It's epic. We don't start shooting there until next weekend, but it's been a huge undertaking and it's really exciting." →

FROM THE SFX ARCHIVES

DATE
27 June 2019

LOCATION
Los Angeles, California

POOL BOY

Step back in time to the summer of 2019, where Dacre Montgomery spills the beans on lifeguard Billy Hargrove in season three of *Stranger Things*...

"Wait a minute... I take my clothes off?"

What's been the fan reaction to Billy Hargrove?

It's been really, really good. There's been a lot of admiration for what I did with the character in season two. I'm really grateful for that.

Billy is a lifeguard in season three. What's your personal connection to water?

I learned to surf this year, but I grew up free diving. That's my biggest connection to the ocean. How deep can I dive? This is years ago now, but I would go pretty deep.

How did you prepare for the swimming pool scenes of season three?

Personally, I just try to focus on the acting. You do a few push-ups and dumbbell curls, but I think I was more focused on the shoot. I'd be thinking about how Billy is going to be framed and what song is going to be playing – but that's peripheral, I guess.

How would you describe Billy's first pool scene?

Billy walks out, he puts out his cigarette on the wall and he takes control of the pool – and that's exactly what I think about. Otherwise, I'm thinking about the 250 extras on set and I'm crapping myself because I'm nervous about what they think of me and what my body looks like. It's easy to get caught up in those thoughts and have a total meltdown.

What's new in season three?

The stakes are huge in season three. The special effects are bigger. The action is bigger. And, more importantly, the story is really heartfelt this year. The kids are on a coming-of-age journey as they are on that precipice from adolescence to adulthood. It's been really nice to see how those dynamics change the story.

How satisfying is the finale to the season?

I was hugely excited when I found out what's going to happen. It's exciting to build up to this amazing climax – and then there's this incredible pay-off, both for my character and the other characters.

The Duffer brothers point out where the water is.

THE UNPUBLISHED *SFX* INTERVIEW

GRAND DESIGNS

PRODUCTION DESIGNER CHRIS TRUJILLO TAKES *SFX* BEHIND THE SCENES OF *STRANGER THINGS*...

FROM THE SFX ARCHIVES
DATE 2 May 2018
LOCATION Atlanta, Georgia

What new sets will we see in season three?

There are a lot of new sets and a lot of epic stuff. *Stranger Things* gets very sci-fi this year. Over on Stage 5, we've built an abandoned warehouse basement, which serves as the lair of our main baddie this year. We have a lot of new domestic interiors – but our biggest and most exciting set is the mall.

Is the mall where the infamous Ships Ahoy ice-cream shop is located?

Yes, that's a store in the mall. You'll find Mr Harrington (Steve, played by Joe Keery) working there this year, along with an exciting new character that joins the gang.

What '80s movies inspired the new mall set?

We did all of our research watching *Bill & Ted* and *Weird Science*. We tried to watch any movie from the '80s that had a mall, but our goal is to do it a little bigger and a little bit more honestly. In a lot of those movies, you sometimes feel their budgets. We tried to avoid all those pitfalls of, "Oh, that looks like a set." That's why we decided to take over a real mall and completely bring it back to life.

> "They are becoming a little bit more preoccupied with girls and the mall and TV"

Are real companies vying to add their '80s shop logos to the mall?

A little bit. We are starting to talk to some companies about placing some products, but for the most part we handpicked what we thought was the best and most interesting. It's been a long process.

Who checks if everything is period-appropriate on the new sets?

We are very conscious of that. Ultimately, we clear everything [for rights] and we make sure everything is period. My department is set deck construction and paint props – and we are 160 people now, so it's a huge operation.

What are the hardest props to source or have approved?

Sometimes the *Star Wars* toys and stuff like that are difficult, legally, to work out.

What else is new in season three?

The Wheeler basement, where the kids play *D&D*, has changed. Mike has officially moved in here, so he spends more of his time in the basement. He's got his TV there now and *Dungeons & Dragons* is starting to take a backseat to the boys' lives.

They are becoming a little bit more preoccupied with girls and the mall and TV. We didn't want to change it too much because it's only been six months since last season. It's still the same vibe, but Mike's crashing on the couch.

Kids, ask your parents what a "mall" was in the 1980s.

Mike's sweet new gaff (at the time, anyway).

Max and Eleven hit the food court hard.

ALL PICTURES © NETFLIX. STOCK IMAGES: GETTY

Dustin sets up his "crazy comms contraption".

No, don't take them out of the box! Oh, too late.

"Pssst... we all leave the room in five, okay?"

Are all the gaming props in the basement true to the '80s time period?

☆ Yes. These are all the games of the era. We recreated all of the packaging, but it's recreated from the original boxes. It's crazy. Every scrap of media from the era; everything from Sears catalogues to pop culture magazines are hunted down for the show. We hunt down all kind of schematics and old science magazines to make sure that we are aesthetically true.

What else will we see in season three?

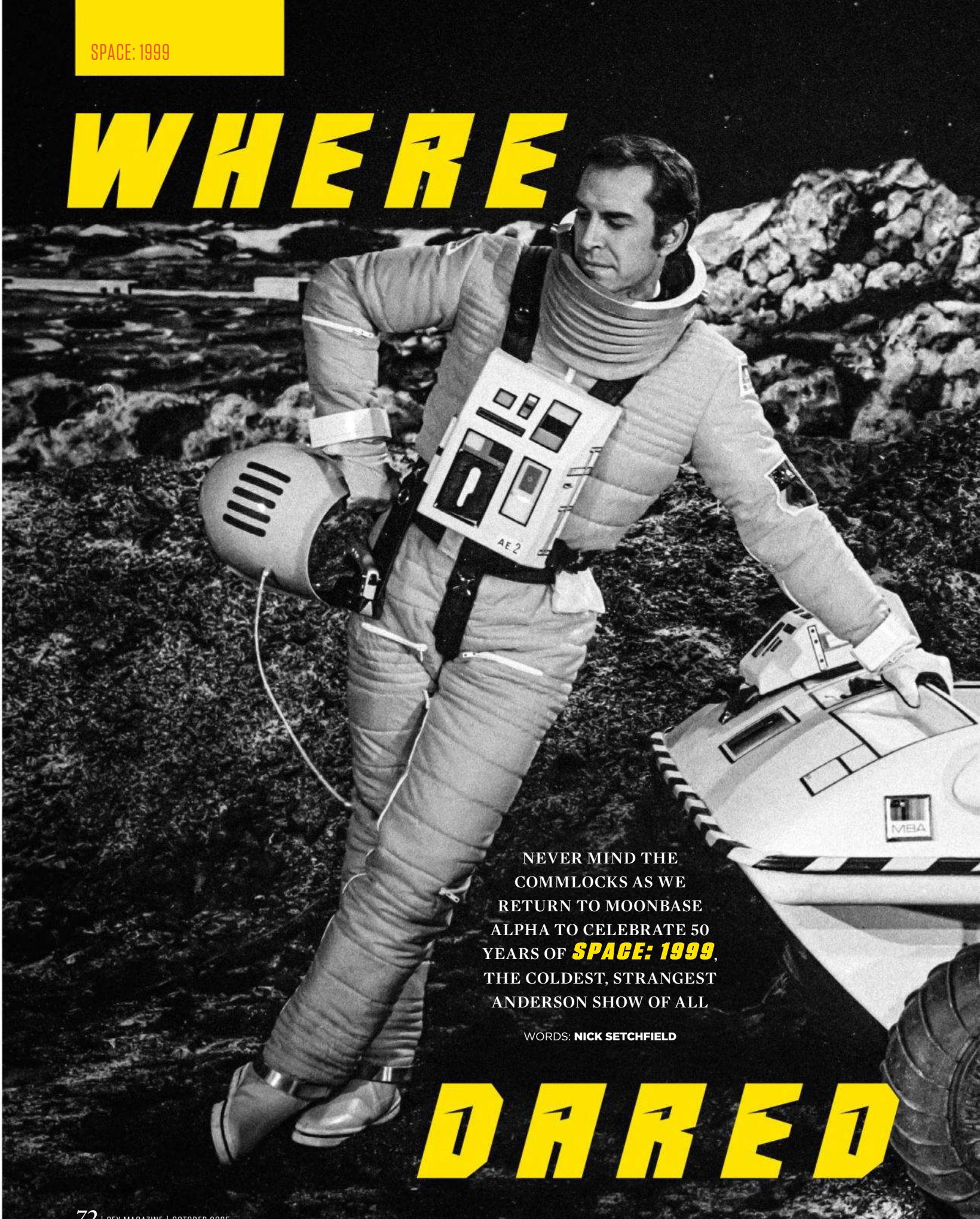
☆ There's a community pool that is epically large. It has thousands and thousands and thousands of gallons of water and it will be heated. It's a real pool. We have completely rehabbed it. The kids go to the pool. They spend some time there. They have fun. The pool is going to be a scene of an awesome showdown moment with the kids.

What other locations are new to the show this year?

☆ Yesterday, we shot on an epic hill. We go outside a little more this season, so we shot on this big, expansive hilltop – where Dustin sets up a crazy communications contraption that he's built. It's really fun and really exciting. That was definitely a really fun prop for this year. ●

The fifth and final season of Stranger Things will be released on Netflix in three parts. Part one on 26 November, part two on 25 December and part three on 31 December.

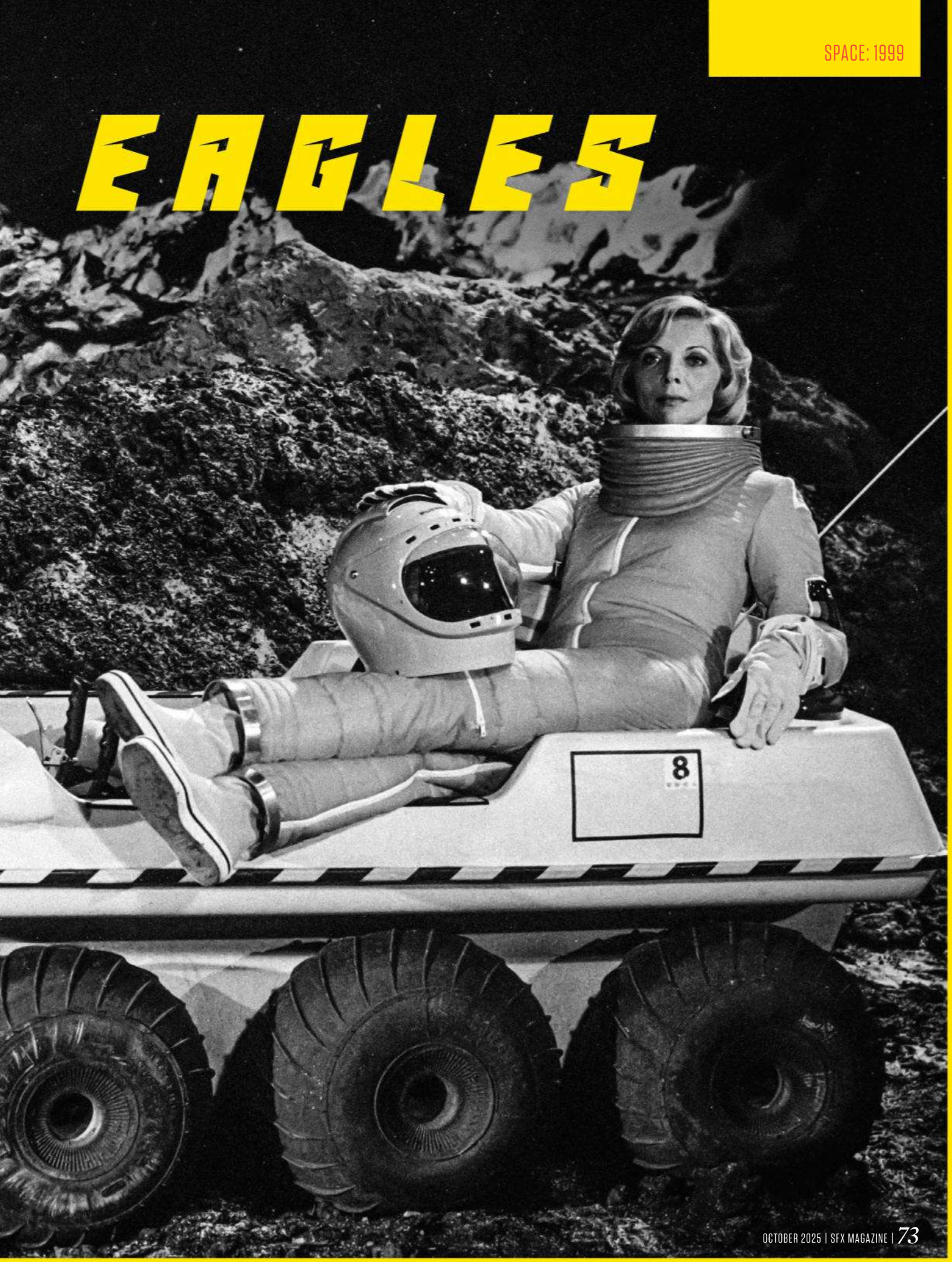
WHERE DARED



NEVER MIND THE COMMLOCKS AS WE RETURN TO MOONBASE ALPHA TO CELEBRATE 50 YEARS OF ***SPACE: 1999***, THE COLDEST, STRANGEST ANDERSON SHOW OF ALL

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

EAGLES



IT'S 1975 AND THE MOON, go-to destination of the space age, so recently conquered by the Apollo missions, is about to be torn from orbit by the power of television.

A chilly, unsettling, frequently surreal watch, *Space: 1999* had a premise as bleak as any lunar landscape. Opening episode "Breakaway" details the catastrophe that serves as the show's inciting incident: on 13 September 1999 nuclear waste stashed on the far side of the Moon erupts in a massive thermonuclear explosion, sending Earth's lone satellite hurtling to the stars. Naturally it's a Monday.

Along for the ride are the crew of Moonbase Alpha, a scientific research station nestled in a crater in the northern hemisphere. As the wayward Moon bagatelles through wormholes and hyperspatial byways, our beige-clad heroes discover a universe more colourful than they ever imagined, and all to a theme tune packing the funkiest wah-wah guitar this side of *Shaft*.

It was a series with ambition to spare – and a budget to match, given that it was reportedly the most expensive production in British TV history at that point. The final offering from the vibrant, prolific partnership between Gerry and Sylvia Anderson, *Space: 1999* had its roots in an abortive second season of *UFO*, one that would have abandoned Earth to focus on the SHADO moonbase that served as the first line of defence against alien invaders.

"They had storylines and were certainly into set design and artwork," says Jamie Anderson, son of Gerry and managing director of Anderson Entertainment, revealing how far into development this unmade sequel season had gone. "They weren't building anything yet, but I guess they had a fairly clear idea of where they wanted to go. I suspect bigger, bolder and better were the themes of the day.

"Dad was very good at rescuing material. He would find a way to preserve the best stuff, the most exciting stuff. I get the impression that by this stage there was a certain amount of desperation. Dad had wanted to work in live-action for his entire life [*UFO* was the Andersons' first shot at a live-action series after they had made their names with Supermarionation] and it must have felt like 'It's all about to be ripped away from me, unless I can find a way to make this work!'

"There must have been tremendous pressure on him and the rest of the team. It's quite a testament to turn an aborted second series of something into a show which is arguably now better known and was more successful commercially. Others might have rolled over and gone, 'Oh well, that's that...' But I bet it was uncomfortable. On the one hand you're thinking, 'Our first foray into live-action has gone so well we're going to get a second season, this is brilliant!' and then to be told it ain't happening... I think the general mood must have been one of stress and distress."

TO BOLDLY GO

Intriguingly, the core idea behind *Space: 1999* may also owe a debt to a certain gentleman superspy. At one point Anderson had pitched a Bond plot that saw a diabolical mastermind threatening to trigger a devastating nuclear explosion on the Moon.

"That was a script by Dad and Tony Barwick from the late '60s," Jamie tells *SFX*. "Whether the idea originated there I don't know. They might have talked about doing it at some earlier stage. I can certainly see it being a Mysteron threat in *Captain Scarlet*! I wonder how many things we see at any point in Anderson history originated from some little spark of an idea earlier on."

It's also tempting to see *Space: 1999* as the Andersons' response to *Star Trek*, a series that was building a fiercely committed fanbase through syndicated repeats in the early '70s. The parallels are obvious: an international crew in colour-coded uniforms, encountering the miracles and terrors of deep space on a weekly basis, forever moving on to the next strange new world. Exploring the final frontier via starship Moon.

"I think if Dad was here and we suggested he was influenced by somebody else's show we would both have our knuckles rapped!" laughs Jamie. "He would watch other stuff to relax but he tended not to watch his competitors, so as not to be influenced by them, by his reasoning. Obviously he was aware of *Star Trek*, and we know that years later he and Gene Roddenberry got together at Pinewood and shared an entire bottle of whisky, so the story goes! There was a bit of a mutual appreciation thing going on.

"To some degree *Space: 1999* is the psychological horror

The Andersons with Martin Landau and Barbara Bain.

Christopher Lee guest-starred as an alien pacifist.

"The Bringers Of Wonder" was edited into a film.

Peter Duncan and Stacy Dorning in "The Exiles".

Terry Richards as alien Thaed in "A Matter Of Balance".

As John Koenig, Martin Landau took the lead role.

Barbara Bain as the serious Dr Helena Russell.

version of *Star Trek*, isn't it? The uncontrolled voyages of Moonbase Alpha. There are clear similarities but equally such different approaches once you start to pick them apart. From exploring an exciting, inviting, although still dramatic universe to one that you're completely at the whim of and is constantly trying to kill you! They're very different tones. I don't think there was any degree of 'We must chase that and replicate it', but I guess it's like growing up with the space race. Your ideas get more mature, more philosophical, perhaps. And Dad and Gene were clearly philosophising on different trajectories."

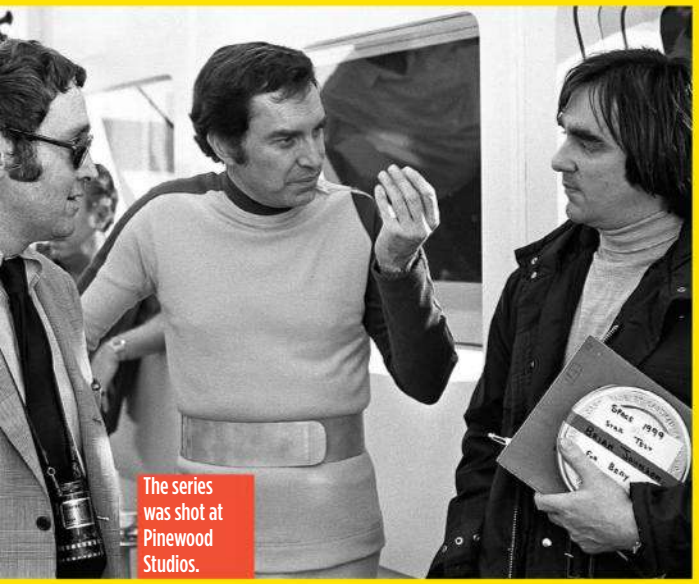
With its sterile environs, sober colour schemes and cool, cerebral approach to cosmic wonders, the world of Moonbase Alpha certainly feels more beholden to Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* than the bright, pulpy milieu of '60s *Star Trek*. As Jamie notes, special effects maestro Brian Johnson

"To some degree Space: 1999 is the psychological horror version of Star Trek"

provides a tangible – if contentious – link between Anderson and the legendary auteur's SF masterpiece.

"Brian worked on *Thunderbirds* and a couple of the other shows and he was headhunted by Kubrick. Dad had a meeting with him and he said, 'Look, Gerry, I've been offered this thing by Stanley Kubrick [*2001*] and it's too good an opportunity to miss. I hope you don't mind.' Dad was furious. He basically said, 'You've learned everything you know with us and now you're going to take it to somebody else and give all our secrets away!' As Brian tells it, Dad slammed a cigar down into the ash tray and embers and ash went everywhere. He said, 'Fuck off and work with Kubrick! You'll never work in this industry again!'

"So Brian went off and worked with Kubrick. And then as *Space: 1999* was coming together, Brian was available and Dad welcomed him →


The series was shot at Pinewood Studios.

There's Dave Prowse beneath that alien suit.

Catherine Schell joined as Maya in series two.

Basil Newall applying makeup to Martin Landau.

Maya took on the shape of this alien in two episodes.

Peter Cushing in "Missing Link" – and gold paint.

PICTURES: ITV/SHUTTERSTOCK, REVEILLE/MIRRORPIX/MIRRORPIX VIA GETTY, STOCK IMAGES: REVEL STOCKART

back. Obviously Brian had learned some stuff on *2001* and there are plenty of visual similarities. And clearly *2001* and *1999* are pretty closely linked years. As I understand it, there are some telegrams in the Kubrick archive between Kubrick and his manager or agent, saying, 'I've seen some stuff from this 1999 thing – we're going to have to sue these thieving bastards!' So Kubrick himself believed there may have been something in there. I think it's wider crew influences. You can clearly see the zeitgeist bleeding in."

PERSONAL SPACE

Space: 1999 is undoubtedly the coldest of the Anderson shows. According to Jamie that tone may well reflect the deteriorating relationship between Gerry and Sylvia.

"Things were not good. It was pretty rough. I think *UFO* was the last point where they were truly creatively collaborating and even then it was strained, to say the least. I think by the time of *Space: 1999* they were in separate offices, with notes being passed between separate secretaries! That's not conducive to collaboration. They were probably both still working to their strengths at this time, Sylvia maintaining relationships with the cast and driving some of the costume work, working with some of the writers on characterisation, and Dad doing his bits with the overall story, the tone, style and direction of the series.

"Maybe the coldness and the sterility is part of that. You can see the decline in comfort and warmth across the previous series – *Thunderbirds* the united family, *Captain Scarlet* the group held together but not by familial bonds, *Joe 90* the solitary, potentially abused youngster and then through to *UFO*, where there are characters whose marriages are falling apart. Then you're into this angsty, dark, clinical world. Whether or not it's true, it feels quite symbolic of the relationship and the way it was changing."

Sylvia Anderson found herself overruled when it came to the show's stars. While she favoured British leads for the key roles of Commander John Koenig and Dr Helena Russell, Sir Lew Grade – the sharp-elbowed impressario behind ITC and longtime champion of the Andersons – insisted on Americans, aiming for a US network sale. Enter Martin Landau and Barbara Bain, the husband and wife team best known as Rollin Hand and Cinnamon Carter in *Mission: Impossible*.

This TV power couple arrived with a degree of creative clout, as Jamie reveals. "If you're selling the show based on their names and their previous work, you have to keep them sweet. I've certainly heard stories of other characters getting storylines or heroic moments and that meeting resistance from Martin in particular, and those lines and bits of action being given to him. It's kind of what you expect from a lead.

"Likewise I've read that Barbara was sometimes frustrated appearing next to young, beautiful things. I was watching an episode a couple of days ago and I was constantly fascinated by her hair that never moved, and the very particular philosophical pout that she put on. A very beautiful look, very elegant, but kind of distracting.

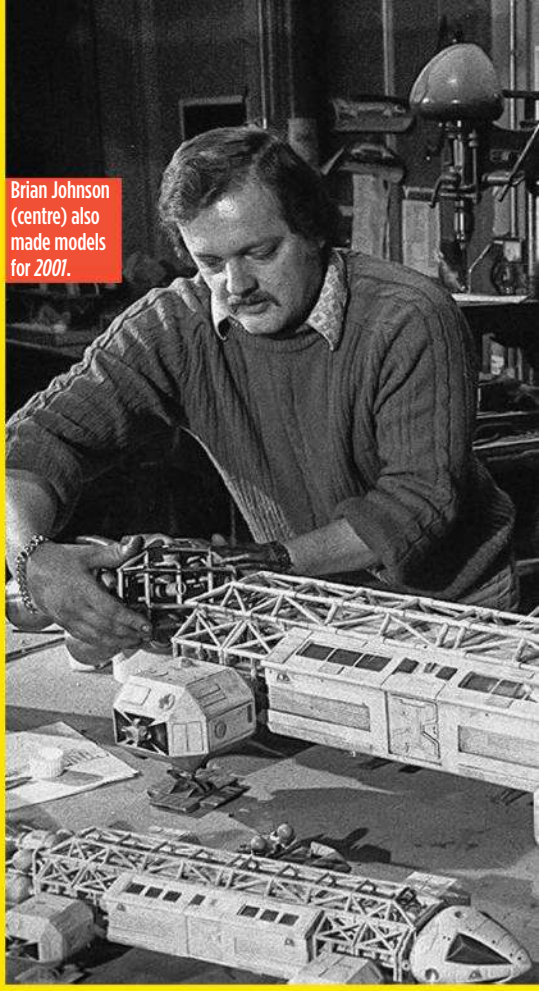
"They were somewhat catered for, somewhat catered to and somewhat creatively involved."

ALIEN INCURSION

When Sylvia Anderson departed the series the American influence only grew. New producer Fred Freiberger had steered the divisive final season of *Star Trek* and came with a mandate to move *Space: 1999* firmly into the realm of action-adventure. Along with a jazzier score and an injection of colour and humour, season two saw the departure of Barry Morse's stoic Professor Victor Bergman and the introduction of Catherine Schell as Maya, a glamorous, beady-browed alien whose gift of "molecular transformation" allowed her to shift form into any living creature.

"I don't think year one was perfect but I think year two was less than perfect," Jamie tells *SFX*. "You can certainly see the burring down of the hard edges and an attempt to make it warmer and funnier and more enclosed. All of those efforts seemed to dilute rather than enhance the stuff that had worked before. There were probably routes to go down to make things better than year one but instead stuff got swapped and changed and added in a way that didn't quite fit with the natural DNA or the soul of the show.

"If you're told, 'We need a lead female character who's an alien' – and let's say that was the guidance from ITC America – perhaps the very fact that you suddenly have a non-human in this arrangement changes the dynamic so enormously that it no longer feels like an isolated group of humans out there in the middle of nowhere. Now they're suddenly connected to the rest of the universe."



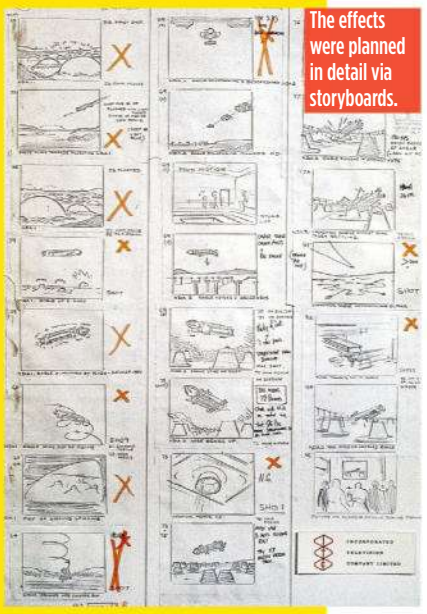
Brian Johnson (centre) also made models for *2001*.

The largest Eagle for filming was 44 inches long.

A number of Eagles were destroyed during filming.

Brian Blessed as lost explorer Cabot Rowland.

Johnson later won Academy Awards for his film work.



The effects were planned in detail via storyboards.

You imagine making *Space: 1999* was ultimately a bruising experience for Anderson, especially as the series ended production only months before George Lucas made science fiction the most insanely bankable genre in the cosmos.

"It can't be anything but bruising, can it?" Jamie says. "You go out there and put your expensive vision to the world, during which time your marriage breaks down completely. You're then diluted by the financier and distributor and then someone else is brought in to say, 'Well, you didn't do it right the first time, let's try again' and that isn't as successful as the first year.

"By the end of that period divorce is on the cards. Lew Grade withdraws his ongoing partnership and all funding and *Star Wars* is in the ascendant while Dad's career is really at its lowest point. So I think there was an awful lot of negativity associated with that period and that show. Sadly I think it probably left him as cold as you might feel watching an episode of *Space: 1999*!"

But half a century away from the show's original broadcast – and a quarter of a century on from the imaginary nuclear catastrophe that now makes it alternative history – *Space: 1999* endures. Just like the Moon escaping Earth's gravity, the show survived the frustrations of its creation to stand as one of the most intriguing and ambitious entries in the Anderson canon.

"So many people who watched it have gone on to change the world, in varying sizes of contribution," says Jamie. "You wonder how much of an influence it had on Bezos and Musk. Certainly it influenced people at NASA and ESA and beyond. It's made science fiction into science fact, which is hugely important and influential. It's become part of our sci-fi cultural tapestry, and long may it continue to be.

"It's an incredible legacy to have."

Space: 1999 is available on Blu-ray.

The Rescue Eagle, identifiable by its red stripes.

The effects sequences were shot at Bray Studios.

STAR VEHICLE

Eagles, Falcons and Thunderbirds

Key to the iconography of *Space: 1999* are the Eagles, Moonbase Alpha's Dinky Toy-friendly fleet of spacecraft.

"Across all the Anderson hero vehicles, the two most successful are Thunderbird 2 and the Eagle," says Jamie Anderson. "Initially you don't really see much similarity between them but they share that modular nature, the interchangeable, pod-carrying element. That non-fixed nature of a vehicle is kind of exciting. It adds a bit of variety and mystery.

"There's something appealing in their overall utilitarian nature, Thunderbird 2 being a huge device to essentially carry equipment and other vehicles and the Eagle with that functional design that looks so great, that sort of scaffolding element in contrast with the amazing insectoid cockpit."

The Eagles also have a surprising connection to *Star Wars*, as Jamie reveals. "The story I know is that George Lucas went to the Bray special effects stage to meet Brian Johnson. At that point they already had a design for the Millennium Falcon. Lucas saw the Eagles on set and suddenly went, 'Oh fuck, our Millennium Falcon design is really similar!' So they redesigned it, to make it look not all like an Eagle."

What's in a name? we wonder. "You think, 'There must be some connection here!'" laughs Jamie. "1999 plus one year tips us into the Millennium, and eagles and falcons are pretty closely linked, aren't they? It does make you think. Then obviously Brian would go and work with George on *The Empire Strikes Back* later on."

Maya's Kreno lifeform shape in its blue variation.

Brought THE SFX AUTHOR INTERVIEW To Book

ANDRZEJ SAPKOWSKI

Harrumph! The Polish novelist discusses his bestselling Witcher books

Words by Jonathan Wright /// Portrait by Torsten Silz

A RARE FEW INTERVIEWEES TREAT questions with a charmingly affable grumpiness. They include Andrzej Sapkowski. For evidence, consider his response when *SFX* asks if he was surprised by the success of his Witcher stories.

"Please forgive my honesty," he says, before describing the question as an "attempt to force a confession". "*Confessio est regina probationum*, as they say – 'the confession is the queen of evidence'. If I answer affirmatively that I was surprised, it'll be evidence of false modesty, with an emphasis on 'false'. If I answer negatively, it'll be evidence of narcissistic cockiness. But I'm not bothered and I'll answer because I don't give a damn about such evidences. The answer is: yes, I was surprised."

Sapkowski's response is, on reflection, perhaps the one you'd expect. When he first introduced the world to the magically enhanced monster wrangler Geralt of Rivia via a short story published in *Fantastyka*, a Polish SFF magazine, it was 1986. Though the Geralt stories gained a cult following in Poland and, as time went on, across central and eastern Europe, it would be another 21 years before the first English translation. His has not been an overnight success.

The books (helped along by the Netflix adaptation) are now bestsellers across the world. The arrival this year of a new novel starring Geralt – a second prequel to the pentalogy first published in Poland between 1994 and 1999 – is a big deal. So why did he want to return to this universe?

"He's quite an interesting character," says Sapkowski. "And his world isn't any less interesting. I think it's worth revisiting both. And, last not least, do not forget the muse. The muse sometimes flies over a writer's head."

SLAV LABOUR?

What does the new book reveal about Geralt? Sapkowski isn't keen to commit himself. "It's for the reader to judge," he says. He's similarly unwilling to engage with discussing whether Geralt is a hero or an antihero.

He's more forthcoming when talking about the series' origins. Much has been made, down the years, of how Sapkowski took inspiration from Slavic mythology. That's "not entirely true", he says. While the idea for Geralt's character came from a Polish fairytale, the specific story "was too universal in form and content to be uncritically called typically Polish or even Slavic".

Later, he began to draw on other mythical traditions. "Yes, I included creatures from Slavic bestiaries – like vampires, leshies [woodland spirits], kikimoras [female house spirits]," Sapkowski explains. "But at the same time I didn't overlook other mythologies either: like the Arabic ghul [a demon-like being associated with graveyards], the Nordic troll, Greek dryad [tree nymph] or Japanese fox woman, to name just a few. And did it often turn out to be quite an eclectic cocktail? Well, nobody's perfect."

The pentology also incorporates Arthurian mythology. When *SFX* suggests many British and American writers would shy away from such an approach because stories of Camelot are too familiar, Sapkowski disagrees. "The vast majority of global fantasy literature – and by 'global' I mean American and British – has its roots in Arthurian mythology," he says, citing everyone from TH White to Lev Grossman.

"Alternatively, the roots can be indirect, less straightforward," Sapkowski adds, "like, for example, the ever-present-in-fantasy theme of a king in conflict with a usurper, reminiscent of Arthur and Mordred. There's also the common trope of a Frodo-like simpleton achieving a heroic deed, similar to Percival. And the widely used quest motif, an open reference to the Holy Grail. Writers shying away? The facts say otherwise!"

BIODATA

From **Łódź, Poland**

Greatest Hits
The Witcher sequence, adapted as three videogames, in comics and on TV, extends to nine books, but Sapkowski himself sees his historical fantasy Hussite Trilogy as his "tour de force".

Random Fact
Before *The Witcher*, there was *The Hexer*, a Polish TV series (2002) which, to judge by his public utterances, Sapkowski seems to have loathed.

DRAWING THE CURTAIN

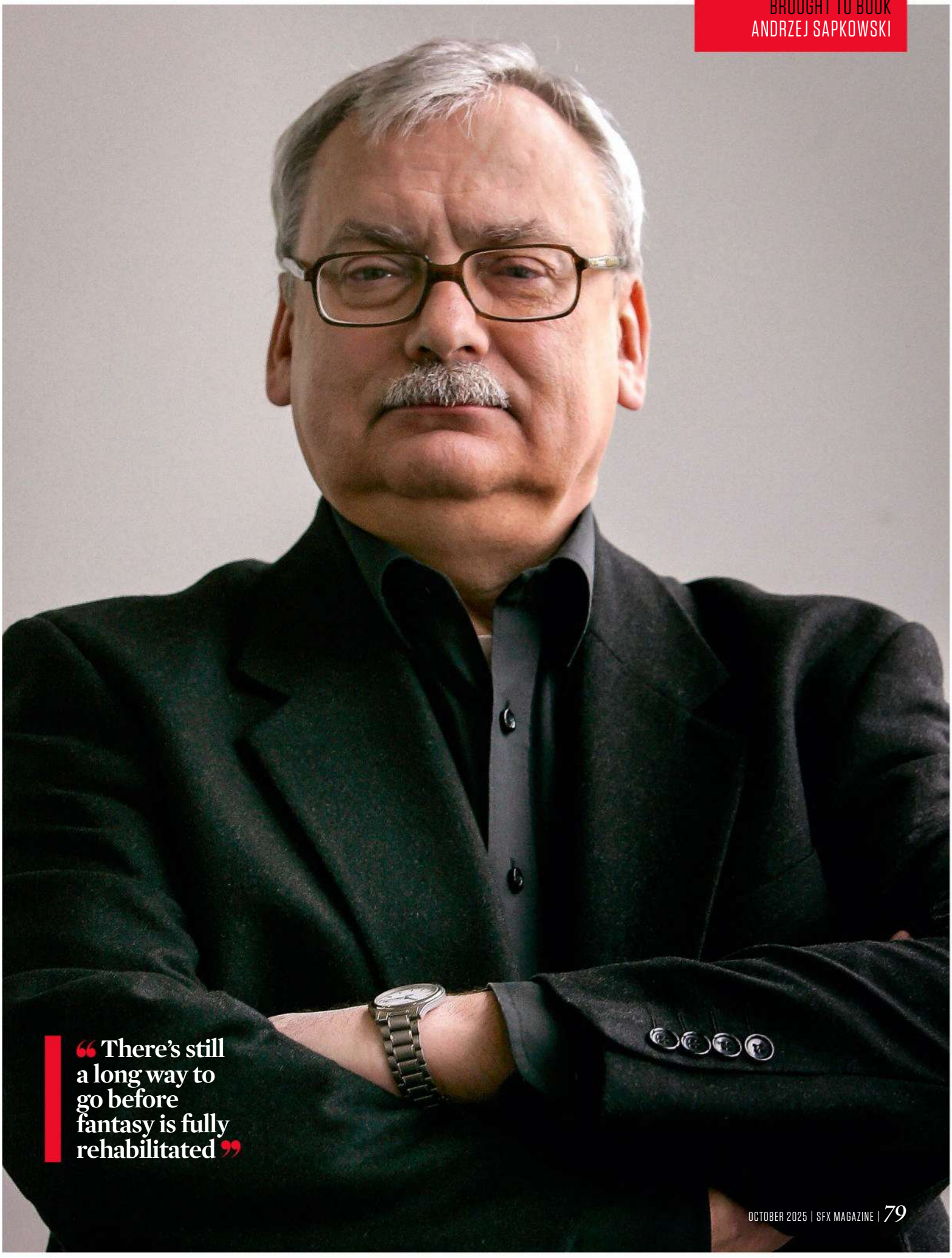
A pattern is emerging. Sapkowski delights in knocking back questions. Ask him about his life in Communist-era Poland and he replies, "I suspect you want me now to colourfully describe my miserable existence behind the barbed wire of the regime, in the drab reality of centrally-planned economy. Forget it. Yes, the Iron Curtain definitely existed, and not everything was always rosy. But I won't elaborate on that. There's a very British saying: right or wrong, my country. Period. I also want to state – to whom it may concern – that it's pointless to look for any brands, scars, marks, blemishes or other stigmas caused by Communist traumas in my person or my works."

If there's a moment when the affable grumpiness slips, it's when Sapkowski discusses snobbishness against fantasy in Poland. "The situation is improving, slowly," he says – but adds, "There's still a long way to go before fantasy is fully rehabilitated as a legitimate genre."

In part, you'd guess the quality of Sapkowski's work has helped, as has its success. Which of the adaptations does he like? "Aha, another IED in the form of a question?" he replies. "The answer is simple: I don't like any of them. Why? Because I'm not easily satisfied." Although he might, he adds, make an exception for audiobooks. "Because an audiobook isn't a visualisation. There is no need to prove the superiority of the written word over images." Word up, because for Sapkowski, it's the writing that really matters.

Crossroads Of Ravens is out on 30 September, from Gollancz.

TORSTEN SILZ/DDP/AFP VIA GETTY



> “There’s still a long way to go before fantasy is fully rehabilitated”

HEAD INTO THE EERIE WORLD OF NEVERMORE ACADEMY

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Reviews

edited by Ian Berriman

CINEMA 82 | TV 84 | HOME ENTERTAINMENT 86 | BOOKS 92 | COMICS 98 | GAMES & STUFF 100

THIS ISSUE 52 REVIEWS

82 THE LONG WALK

Road To Nowhere?

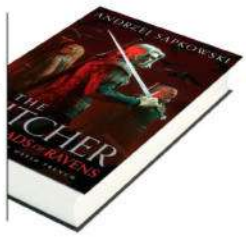
Highlights

84 STRANGE NEW WORLDS

→ The Gorn, the Klingons, Trelane and a holodeck all feature in season three.

86 OBJECT Z

→ Rediffusion didn't just sell tellies, y'know. They made stuff to show on them – like this '60s sci-fi show.



92 CROSSROADS OF RAVENS

→ Andrzej Sapkowski's newie sees a teenage Geralt taken under a veteran witcher's wing.

→ RATINGS EXPLAINED ★★★★★ SUPERB ★★★★☆ GOOD ★★★☆☆ AVERAGE ★★☆☆☆ POOR ★☆☆☆☆ TERRIBLE

"Wait! Stop! I forgot my packed lunch!"

THE LONG WALK

Sole survivors

★★★★½

RELEASED 12 SEPTEMBER

15 | 108 minutes

Director **Francis Lawrence**

Cast **Cooper Hoffman, David Jonsson, Mark Hamill, Garrett Wareing**

A deadly competition that young people compete in yearly to boost morale in a dystopian US... *The Hunger Games* stalwart Francis Lawrence has been in this ballpark before, but this spare, punishing Stephen King adaptation is worlds away from Panem and its YA worldbuilding.

The opening text dump – in the form of a letter sent to Raymond Garraty (Cooper Hoffman) – sets out the film's lean, mean premise. In an alternate timeline, the Long Walk is an annual event that young men volunteer to compete in. The rules are simple: keep walking, on a specified path, and don't dip below 3mph. You get three brief warnings, and after that it's point-blank execution on the spot. The last man walking out of the 50 contenders gets unimaginable riches and a single wish granted.

Lawrence's approach is similarly stripped-back. Very little additional context is given beyond the walk itself, besides a couple of brief flashbacks for Ray and an emotional farewell with his mother when he's dropped at the starting line. The contenders (one representing each state, and referred to by number) reveal tidbits of information as the journey progresses. The military detail that follows – led by Mark Hamill's the Major, a real piece of work and a hard 180 from Luke Skywalker, one-note but effective – has guns and cameras trained on the participants, but we never see what's being broadcast.

> **"The rules are simple: keep walking, and don't dip below 3mph"**

Jeremiah Fraites's big-strings score is never obtrusive, and Jo Willems's unfussy cinematography captures the desolate, flat landscapes (with Canada standing in for the US) and occasionally finds a strikingly beautiful image, like the backlit silhouettes of nighttime walkers trimmed with gold.

It's a gruelling watch. As well as a torrent of bloody headshots, there are bleeding feet, broken ankles, toxic banter and poorly timed toilet breaks. And as Lawrence barely cuts away from the march, the tension builds at a steady pace. It's fairly obvious from the beginning which of the 50 are going to go the furthest. But what is surprising is how emotional *The Long Walk* is. From the early camaraderie that leads to genuine heartfelt connections, screenwriter JT Mollner (who brought us the terrifically twisty *Strange Darling*) economically builds the relationships and a sense of community that gradually intensifies as the numbers inevitably dwindle.

Hoffman is great as the ostensible protagonist (Ray has the home-state advantage in the competition), but the standout is David Jonsson. Superb as the android Andy in *Alien: Romulus*, he makes an even stronger impression here as the determined Peter, outrunning his past while pounding the pavement.

Peter and Ray's friendship is one of this soulful drama's enduring highlights. In a banner year for King adaptations - following *The Life Of Chuck*, with Edgar Wright's *The Running Man* to come – *The Long Walk* puts its best foot forward.

Matt Maytum

i Lawrence shot the film chronologically to help the actors bond; sometimes they'd walk 30,000 steps a day together.

STRANGE JOURNEY: THE STORY OF ROCKY HORROR

★★★★½

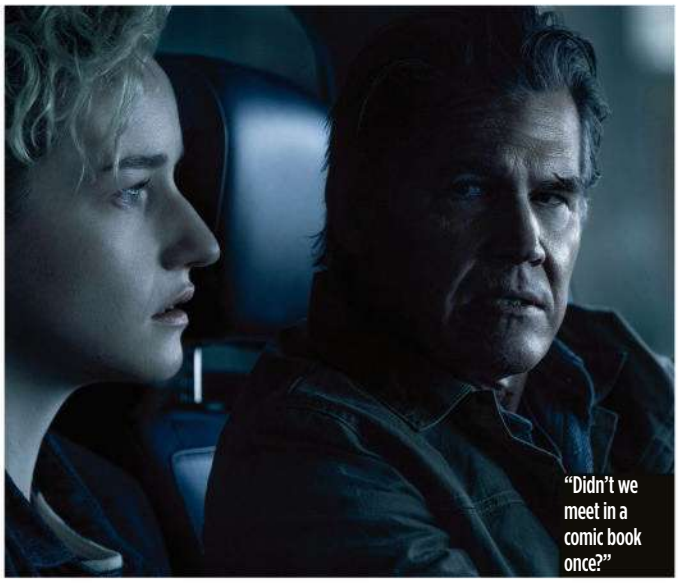
RELEASED 3 OCTOBER
15 | 90 minutes
Director **Linus O'Brien**

"I loved every minute of it," says Tim Curry of filming *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* in 1974. Barry Bostwick has another take: "I was wet and miserable most of the time." The one thing they do agree on, however, is that the result was a milestone in cinema history.

This documentary's focus falls mainly on *Rocky Horror*'s creator, Richard O'Brien. Made by his son, Linus, it unspools the history of the musical, taking in everything from Richard's roots in a New Zealand suburb to the uproarious cult showings of his initially unpopular movie, screenings that are still running 50 years on.

It's a sensitive, beautiful documentary – Richard is moved to tears at times, much to his annoyance – with interviews with many of the stars (Curry, Patricia Quinn, Susan Sarandon) and others involved. Experts and celebs such as Jack Black and Trixie Mattel pop up to affirm their love.

There's not much here that die-hard *Rocky Horror* fans won't know already. That doesn't matter: there's still joy in watching old theatre footage, or seeing Richard reading through the notes he made as the play was gestating. This documentary confirms that *Rocky Horror* deserves its place in the pantheon of the weird. As Black says: "These songs tickle the soul." Long may the tickling continue. **Jayne Nelson**



WEAPONS

SFX Loves

A runaway success

★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!
18 | 128 minutes
Director **Zach Cregger**
Cast **Julia Garner, Josh Brolin, Alden Ehrenreich, Austin Abrams**

Warner Bros kept *Weapons* from UK critics until the last moment – hence this belated writeup. Galling though that is, we grudgingly appreciate the motive, because there are so many terrific surprises to spoil, potentially. We'll do our best to preserve them.

The setup is dispensed with in mere moments. In small-town Pennsylvania, 17 children – all from the same class – have disappeared, inexplicably waking at 2.17am and running from their homes. Is some government experiment responsible? Alien interference? Your chances of joining the dots on the seeded clues are slim, as *Weapons* revives a rarely-explored subgenre. It's hard to remember the last time it was executed with such elan.

The sprint start is followed by a slow-burn, ingeniously structured in six chapters, each centred on a different character. We see the same events replayed from different perspectives, *Rashomon* style – but each section also moves the story on, slowly revealing more of the big picture. The various POV figures – including hot mess teacher Justine (Julia Garner) and a father of one of the kids (Josh Brolin) – are beautifully fleshed-out, to the point where you almost want answers to be deferred. (We'd happily have luxuriated in a 10-hour TV version.)

It's a film that makes great use of stillness – not since *A Quiet Place* has an audience been so willing to hold their breath – but also boasts explosive moments, wince-inducing grisliness and immaculate comic timing. Not to mention what will surely be this Halloween's hottest cosplay look...

The words "What the fuck?!" are spoken several times, and will probably leap to your lips too. Latecomers, waste no time in loading up *Weapons* as soon as you can. It's up there with *It Follows*, *Get Out* and *Hereditary* as one of the most gripping and original horror films of the last decade. **Ian Berriman**

i In the script, the way the kids run, arms out, is compared to the iconic 1972 photo of a Vietnamese girl covered in napalm.

HAPPYEND

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
12A | 113 minutes
Director **Neo Sora**
Cast **Hayato Kurihara, Yukito Hidaka, Yuta Hayashi, Shina Peng**

Titled after a track by his father, renowned musician Ryuichi Sakamoto, Neo Sora's debut dramatic feature takes us an inch into the future to chart the first stirrings of an Orwellian state.

Set in a perversely empty Tokyo – the camera lingers on bridges, walkways and buildings but the streets are barely bothered by people – *Happyend* follows a free-spirited group of high schoolers as they rub up against authority, both big and small. As the Japanese government issues ever more restrictive emergency decrees, claiming an apocalyptic earthquake is imminent, the school installs state-of-the-art surveillance gear to keep tabs on its prank-loving pupils.

Despite the socially-charged subject matter there's a dry sense of humour on display. Sora gets some charming performances from his young cast, and it's all played with clear affection for these characters as they prepare to step into adulthood and a world determined to circumscribe their lives.

But as revolutions go this is a tame, low-key affair, which reneges on the film's opening promise that "Something big is about to change". Laidback pacing and rambling plotting ultimately rob the story of any true stakes or urgency. With governments around the globe flexing their muscles right now, this cautionary tale could do with more bite. **Nick Setchfield**

For now, they're boldly going where they're told.

DRINKING GAME

Knock back a beverage of your choice every time...

- **Captain Pike cooks a delicious feast in his quarters.**
- **Dr M'Benga stares wistfully into the middle distance.**
- **Spock and La'an have a sexually charged private dance lesson.**

- **Scotty fixes a seemingly insuperable technical issue.**
- **Chief engineer Pelia's accent becomes incomprehensible.**
- **A bridge officer deliberately fudges some numbers.**
- **Beto Ortegas's documentary annoys a member of the crew.**

STAR TREK: STRANGE NEW WORLDS Season Three

Where someone has gone before

★★★½☆

UK/US **Paramount+, streaming now**

Showrunners **Akiva Goldsman, Henry Alonso Myers**

Cast **Anson Mount, Ethan Peck, Rebecca Romijn, Jess Bush, Celia Rose Gooding, Melissa Navia**

EPISODES 3.01-3.10 **What is *Strange New Worlds*' core mission?** If the Discovery spin-off's prime directive is to provide an origin story for James T Kirk's legendary crew, then season three delivers. But fulfilling those famous promises to seek out new life and new civilisations? Not so much.

Based on the evidence presented here, the final frontier is a *very* small place. During this particular assortment of voyages, Captain Pike and co regularly bump into familiar faces, including the Gorn, chip-off-the-old-Q Trelane and Nurse Chapel's soon-to-be-late fiancé Roger Korby. Throw in a young Montgomery Scott taking up residence in engineering, and you can't move for legacy characters.

Admittedly, extra screentime for the likes of Uhura and Chapel is welcome. But considering the JJ Abrams movies have already delivered a take on Kirk: The Early Years (albeit in a different timeline), the USS Farragut's cocky young first officer tends to feel like an unwanted guest when he visits the Enterprise. Everybody knows his time will come.

The limitations of a 10-part season are also obvious. When 20-plus episode seasons were the norm in the '90s there was room to experiment with sci-fi tropes – the odd misfire didn't really matter. But by the time this third outing has delivered a couple of comedy stories, a gimmicky documentary episode (didn't *Battlestar Galactica* do that?) and rebooted the cliché of the faulty holodeck, there isn't much time left for bona fide boldly going.

Luckily, when this prequel series stops looking to the past (or should that be future?), it's often brilliant. New antagonists the Vezda bring a horror-adjacent vibe to proceedings, while a satisfying arc for Pike's partner, Marie Batel, underpins the season. Ace pilot Erica Ortegas, too often reduced to one-liners on the bridge, is also rewarded with one of the best stories of the run when she's marooned on an alien world. It's a shame that the series' obsession with existing canon rears its head before the episode is done.

The show's trump card remains its cast, however. There's an easy chemistry between the leads, while the stars playing returning characters (mostly) resist the temptation to imitate the original actors. Ethan Peck's exploration of Spock's human side is particularly good fun.

Indeed, there's so much to like about *Strange New Worlds* that the portents of *Trek* to come feel unnecessary. With two seasons remaining, this show deserves to be so much more than a five-year mission in nostalgia. **Richard Edwards**

i Three-armed bartender Kelzing belongs to the same race as Arex, the navigator in *Star Trek: The Animated Series*.

PLAYING GRACIE DARLING

The Kids Are Not Alright

★★½☆☆

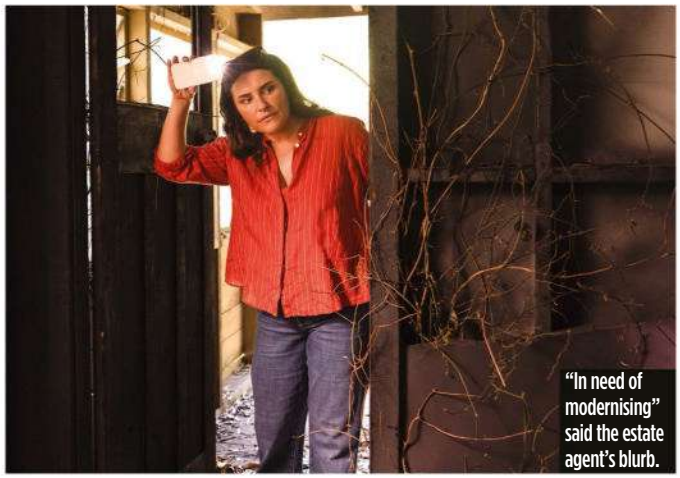
UK **Paramount+, streaming now**
Creator **Miranda Nation**
Cast **Morgana O'Reilly, Chloe Brink, Harriet Walter, Rudi Dharmalingam**

EPISODES 1.01-1.06 **After a girl,** Gracie Darling, went missing during a ill-fated seance in 1997, the event became part of folklore for a small, rural Australian town. Over two decades later, local teenagers regularly "play Gracie Darling", re-enacting the seance for thrills. Which, of course, eventually unleashes something malevolent...

Or it could be something that simply wants to blow open one family's dirty secret, and has a ham-fisted way of going about it.

Because *Playing Gracie Darling* is basically a standard mystery series, complete with bodies, red herrings, multiple suspects and a kooky female investigator, that's had a bunch of off-the-peg supernatural plot devices thrown at it.

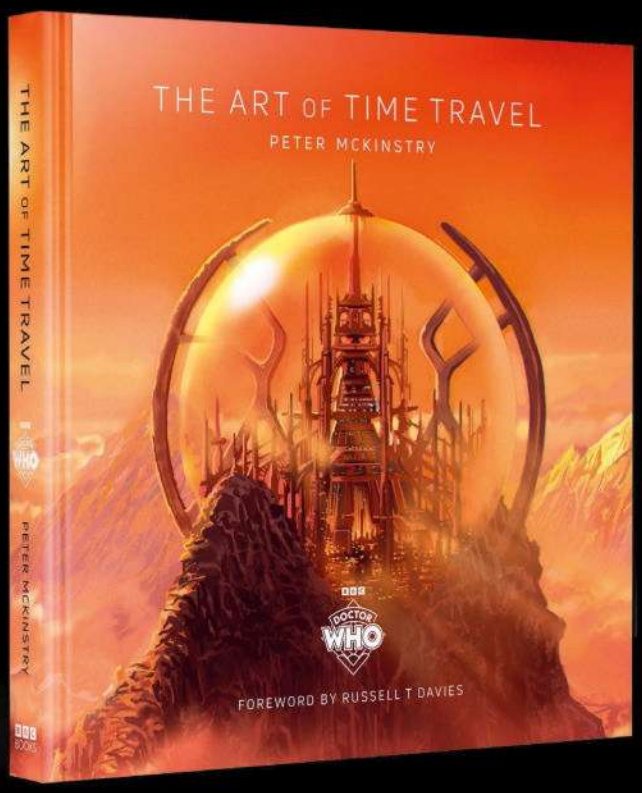
The investigator isn't a cop in this case but a child psychologist, Joni, who was one of the girls at the original seance. She's grown into a supernatural sceptic, so when kids start acting possessed, she's convinced it's mass psychosis. But when Gracie's daughter goes missing, Joni starts investigating. Oh, and sleeping with half the male suspects, but that's another matter. She also starts having nightmares and visions that give her clues about where to poke her nose, but still refuses to accept there's anything spooky going on.



"In need of modernising" said the estate agent's blurb.

Possessing the pace and tone of a Scandi noir crime show (though not the protogonist – Joni is far too hot-blooded and impulsive for sensible knitwear), and an impressive cast (especially the youngsters), *Playing Gracie Darling* is blandly watchable, mainly thanks to the strength of the characters, but doesn't satisfy as either a crime procedural or a supernatural drama. Also, points deducted for perpetuating the Trump-backed myth that wind turbines kill more wildlife than fossil fuels. **Dave Golder**

ℹ Series director Jonathan Brough helmed 40 episodes of *Power Rangers* when that show was being made in New Zealand.



BBC DOCTOR WHO

THE ART OF TIME TRAVEL

FEATURING NEVER-BEFORE-SEEN CONCEPT ART, SKETCHES, AND DESIGNS

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OBJECT Z

Brace for impact

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED 22 SEPTEMBER

1965 | PG | Blu-ray

Director **Daphne Shadwell**

Cast **Trevor Bannister, Ralph Nossek, Celia Bannerman, William Abney**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **If you're of a** certain age, the name Rediffusion may bring to mind a high street brand – maybe the company once rented you a telly. Those of an even more advanced vintage may recall its brief spell as an ITV franchise-holder. *At Last The 1948 Show* and *Do Not Adjust Your Set* (early vehicles for future members of Monty Python) were Rediffusion productions. So was this obscure, earthbound SF serial.

The target audience can seem unclear. *Object Z* aired in a teatime slot, and early on there are earnest educational aspects ("Hey kids, here's how a blink comparator works!"). But it unfolds entirely in the spheres of media, science and government, without so much as a single sprog for the PM to pat on the head. It all makes sense once you know that writer Christopher McMaster (then *Coronation Street*'s most prolific director) initially wrote the series for adults.

It begins as a stiff-upper-lip precursor of *Armageddon*, as the titular space body is spotted by an observatory. After it's confirmed that this six-mile-wide rock is on a collision course with Earth, attempts are made to deflect it, but come to naught, leaving mankind with a tense six-week wait for an impact which could destroy all life, or leave a few survivors.

It's here, when the clock is ticking, that the serial is at its least child-friendly. There are fascinating parallels with our collective experience of Covid-19. Initially, faced with a common threat, humanity pulls together. Then conspiracy theories start to flourish ("It's all a plot!" declares one housewife), as grifters seek to take advantage. Arthur White makes a powerful impression as Keeler, a bellicose fascist demagogue whose main concern is that Britain is best placed to rule whatever smoking ruins remain.

Fans of '70s sitcoms will be amused to find *Are You Being Served?* star Trevor Bannister centrally placed as a dashing TV journalist, regularly tasked with delivering infodump speeches direct to camera.

Compared to the work of Nigel Kneale, it seems rather naïve, with a good deal of stock dialogue. Cheap too – with none of the location filming afforded to, say, *Quatermass 2*. We hear about civil unrest but never see it. On the rare occasions we venture outside, the backdrops are painfully artificial.

It remains entertaining, though. Your satisfaction level may depend

> **"It begins as a stiff-upper-lip precursor of Armageddon"**

on how well you can stomach the three major twists – the last of which is utterly preposterous, defying all plausibility or basic psychological realism.

Extras All six episodes of this BFI release have commentary. The first five feature a relay team of vintage TV experts; then Toby Hadoke coaxes reminiscences from star Celia Bannerman.

"In Search Of *Sierra Nine*" (seven minutes) offers a tantalising glimpse of another Rediffusion show, centred on a government department which investigates devices like a death ray. Vic Pratt talks over clips of all that survives: a mute version of a single episode. A gallery includes stills and paperwork – press material and contract letters. Plus: the script for episode one; a 30-page booklet.

Ian Berriman

"Are you free, Mr Lucas?" "Wrong show."

A BFI Rediffusion season is currently running in London. *Object Z* is screening as part of it, at the NFT on 21 September.

4K X FOUR

OLD MOVIES NOW AVAILABLE ON UHD

As Ed and Lorraine Warren bow out, why not revisit **THE CONJURING** (out now)? Set in 1971, it sees the paranormal investigators aiding a family whose new home once belonged to a Satan-worshipping witch. We said: "Pretty much every hoary old horror cliché is ticked off... Doesn't matter one jot, as James Wan and his editor have an impeccable sense of timing." This Collector's Edition has two new "looking back" and "reflecting" featurettes. Physical goodies include a poster and 11 art cards. In Tim Burton's stop-motion flick **CORPSE BRIDE** (22 September), a young man's dragged down to the Land of the Dead after accidentally popping a ring on the finger of the titular revenant. We said: "Kooky visual charm, daft puns and great voice work keep it bubbling merrily away." There are two new retrospective pieces. The tat: two posters; a zine; art cards of character designs and storyboards; stickers. **CREEPSHOW 2** (29 September) only features three stories, rather than the five in George Romero and Stephen King's first EC Comics-homaging anthology. We said: "All three are simplistic but diverting enough." Bonuses match Arrow's 2020 Blu-ray, so there's little incentive to upgrade. Finally, Peter Yates's science fantasy **KRULL** (15 September), sees a prince setting out to rescue his princess from the spaceship fortress of alien invaders. We said: "Utterly laughable in places, but it's easy to get swept up in the fast-moving plot." No new extras here – just two old commentaries and a vintage Making Of.

WHO WANTS TO KILL JESSIE?

The Comic Strip Presents

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

1966 | 12 | Blu-ray

Director **Václav Vorlíček**

Cast **Jiří Sovák, Olga Schoberová, Dana Medřická**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **The Czechoslovak** films that have found a UK audience tend to be those deemed intellectually respectable. That leaves popular comedies like this out in the cold – rather unfairly.

It centres on two inventions: a machine which visualises dreams, and a serum that eradicates those deemed negative. Unforeseen side effect: the dream objects transfer into reality. This results in Jiří Sovák's Professor Beránek finding a blonde in his bed, and two villains from her comic – a Superman type and his cowboy sidekick – wrecking his flat.

While the film can't compete with contemporaries like *Danger: Diabolik* and *Modesty Blaise* (for one thing, it's in black and white), it has some delightfully absurdist moments (a cow lounging in a hammock, enjoying a string quartet) and inventive ideas: Jessie can only communicate via speech bubbles hanging in mid-air.

Much of the humour screams "'70s sitcom": there's a running gag about how the henpecked Beránek and his wife only have sex on Thursdays. But there's also plenty of rambunctious farce of the sort *The Goodies* fans will appreciate, and a vein of sly satire.

Kill is actually the least popular of the three options.

When a speech bubble cry of "Freedom for dreams!" pops up, it's not hard to see the Communist regime was being lampooned. Luckily, the authorities seem to have remained blind to the fact...

Extras This Second Run release offers an interesting talking head by a film historian (47 minutes) which runs through other examples of the bláznivé komedie (crazy comedies) genre, many the work of the same writer/director team. "Direktiva", a 1955 short by the same director (24 minutes), extracts wry humour from the Communist-era anxiety over following orders. An old episode of podcast *The Projection Booth* serves as a commentary track. Plus: a booklet. **Ian Berriman**

i Olga Schoberová (Jessie) later married John Calley, the Warner Bros studio chief who greenlit *The Exorcist* and *Superman*.

THE MAN IN BLACK

Dyall of destiny

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

1950 | PG | 4K & Blu-ray

Director **Francis Searle**

Cast **Sidney James, Valentine Dyall, Betty Ann Davies, Sheila Burrell**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Long before Will** Smith packed a neuralyzer, Valentine Dyall was the original Man In Black. As sepulchral host of radio series *Appointment With Fear* he fronted tales of suspense and the supernatural with a voice like cyanide-laced chocolate.

This early Hammer brings "The BBC Sensation" to the screen. Dyall introduces its cast of cads, schemers and innocents like Cluedo cards, setting up a tale of intrigue sparked by the death of millionaire Henry Clavering in – splendidly – a freak yoga accident.

Its crisp black and white photography refreshed by a sumptuous new restoration, this is a cosy drawing-room mystery that flirts with the supernatural, throwing in seances and spooky footsteps against the backdrop of an old house. Be prepared for the cognitive dissonance of seeing Sid James play it impressively straight, far from the lecherous cackle merchant of the *Carry Ons*.

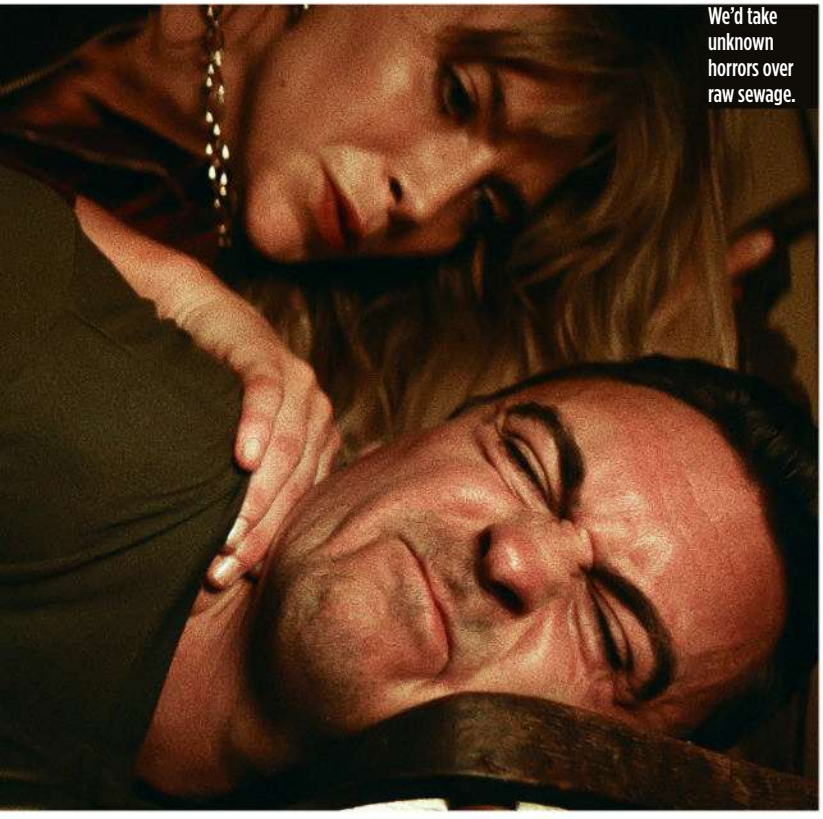
Extras Two enjoyable commentary pairings: Hammer House Of Podcast's Lizbeth Myles and Paul Cornell, plus BFI curator Will Fowler and academic Melanie Williams. Crime writers Andrew Taylor and Martin Edwards discuss *Appointment With Fear* mainstay John Dickson Carr, occult-adjacent master of the locked room mystery (29 minutes), while Richard Hand presents a fascinating potted history of horror radio, complete with evocative clips (25 minutes).

Mr Black, with a Hammer, in the Blu-ray player...

Valentine Dyall gets a brief but illuminating biography (22 minutes), while an archive audio interview with director Francis Searle showcases his undying antipathy towards Hammer's Michael Carreras (20 minutes).

Elsewhere there's an amusingly pseudo-mystical contemporary documentary on yoga (26 minutes), and three 1943 episodes of *Suspense*, American radio's forerunner to *Appointment With Fear* – one of which features Peter Lorre (30 minutes each approx). Plus: an image gallery; the UK censor card. This limited edition comes with a 120-page booklet containing articles on the film and Hammer, plus a reproduction of the press sheet. **Nick Setchfield**

i Dyall was offered a choice of names for the character that made him famous – the Man In Black or The Man Who Laughs.



We'd take unknown horrors over raw sewage.

THE DROWNED

The water's edge

★★★★☆

RELEASED 6 OCTOBER

2025 | N/A | Digital

Director **Samuel Clemens**

Cast **Alan Calton, Lily Catalifo, Lara Lemon, Dominic Vulliamy**

"We've all had a stressful and incredibly life-altering day," declares a character in Samuel Clemens's assured debut feature. If only they knew what was yet to come in a movie that slides from grounded, gun-packing crime drama to hallucinatory horror – with a chilling sidestep into antiquity on the way.

Charting the aftermath of a high-end art theft, *The Drowned* finds its increasingly paranoid protagonists hiding out in a coastal bolthole. The dread builds in increments: entrails found on the beach, hinting at the fate of the missing accomplice who was supposed to arrive before them; a vision of blood swirling like a demonic vortex; subliminal flashes of the stolen painting that now feels like a cursed object.

As the three men are joined in the house by a matching trio of young women the dynamics twist again. Flirtatious but with an unmistakable base note of threat, these enigmatic guests edge the story into the realm of myth.

The budget is modest but Clemens brings visual flair. Striking aerial shots summon encroaching menace from open spaces, while resonant imagery splices terror with beauty. Taut and immersive but loaded with echoes and ambiguities, *The Drowned* delivers something truly intriguing on the tide. **Nick Setchfield**

ℹ The painting the thieves steal, Waterhouse's Hylas And The Nymphs, is on display at Manchester Art Gallery.

THAT ALIEN, SOUND

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | N/A | Digital

Body swap concepts don't come much more unlikely: while listening to a livestreamed concert, frustrated musician Mika switches places with a sentient soundwave. This soundwave (named "Sound" by Mika's pals) is an alien that's been hanging out listening to broadcasts from Earth. Now Mika is floating in outer space, while Sound discovers burritos, sunshine and drumming.

Sound's wide-eyed wonder will irritate cynics, but this isn't for them. Quirky and charming, it's a very sweet reminder to live in the moment. **Sarah Dobbs**

SOMNIUM

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | 15 | Digital

Playing like a dark mumblecore movie, this indie horror finds smalltown ingenue Gemma adrift in LA as she chases stardom. Taking a job at a sleep clinic trading in designer dreams, she finds an abusive secret concealed within its bleak corridors.

Chloë Levine is an appealing lead, but while it flirts with Lynchian atmosphere this Tinseltown fable feels muddled, never quite landing its dream factory metaphor. Brilliant creature design, though, enhanced by splendidly sinister movement. **Nick Setchfield**

YEAR 10

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | 15 | Digital

Cannibals and wild dogs are the threat in this mud-caked British horror, not 14-year-olds.

Set a decade post-apocalypse, it's an exercise in setting limitations: shot all on location, with no dialogue (humanity may have lost the power of speech). We follow Son as he strives to recover meds needed by Girl from a cannibal camp.

The situations used to build tension are repetitive (will Son be found?) and the baddies' observation skills are comically poor, but an oppressive score and absence of longueurs mean you're sucked in. **Ian Berriman**

THE PROTOS EXPERIMENT

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | 15 | Digital

This sci-fi thriller makes its small budget and minimalist sets go a long way, as a bunch of test subjects battle to survive a series of sinister experiments. Co-scripted by British horror author Simon Clark, the film's *Cube*-meets-*Squid Game* challenges are inventive enough to keep you guessing about the captors' motives early on, though it does meander after the big reveal – it feels like an idea for a regular-length *Black Mirror* episode overstretched to feature length. **Richard Edwards**

TROUBLE EVERY DAY

Love bites

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2001 | 18 | Blu-ray

Director **Claire Denis**

Cast **Vincent Gallo, Tricia Vessey, Béatrice Dalle, Alex Descas**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **The sort of** confluence of "high culture" and genre tropes which sometimes makes horror fans feel like only they can see the Emperor's winky, Claire Denis's *Trouble Every Day* came as a surprise. No one expected the arthouse auteur to follow her Foreign Legion hit *Beau Travail* with a transgressive tale of cannibalistic sexual urges.

Though bracketed under the "New French Extremity" label, it's pretty tame compared to *Martyrs* or *Irréversible*. It's tempting to imagine the alternative-universe video nasty which could have sprung from the same treatment. The licking of bloody faces would have been supplemented by bags of butcher's scraps. There'd be one-finger synth instead of Tindersticks' melancholy score. And the details of how US scientist Shane Brown (Vincent Gallo) and a former colleague's wife (a feral, mute Beatrice Dalle) acquired a taste for blood (something to do with research into "problems of libido") would likely be less vague.

Lucio Fulci's take would surely be less languid too. The moment Brown's gaze falls on a hotel maid, we know she's in trouble – but this generates an anguished sense of inevitability more than dramatic tension. And no cannibal shocker generates an erotic charge the way Denis's camera does, as it slowly traverses landscapes of bare flesh.

Extras This Eureka restoration's most essential bonus is an old commentary by Denis and her DoP: they discuss variations from the script, point out off-the-cuff shots, and so on. Elsewhere, it's all academics – so expect some high-status verbosity. Dr Lindsay Hallam provides an observational commentary. Dr Alice Haylett Bryan (26 minutes) places the film within the context of New French Extremity – and bends over backwards to draw a distinction between the killers (apparently when Dalle's Coré bites strangers' faces off it's "an act of love"). Oh yeah? Finally, Dr Virginie Sélavy (23 minutes) compares this tale of "scientific vampirism" to the likes of *Carmilla* and *Dracula*. Plus: trailer. The dual-format 4K edition comes with a 60-page booklet and four art cards. **Ian Berriman**

Not a lady to whom you'd want to say "bite me".

Claire Denis was strongly inspired by Canadian photographer Jeff Wall's images of suburban alienation.

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THE WOODS

Second time Lucky

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED 15 SEPTEMBER
2006 | 15 | Blu-ray
Director **Lucky McKee**
Cast **Agnes Bruckner, Patricia Clarkson, Rachel Nichols**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **A kind of folk** horror/*Carrie* hybrid, set in an isolated girls' boarding school in 1965, Lucky McKee's graduation to "proper" filmmaking is less fondly remembered than his shoestring-budget debut *May*, but still has a good deal of personality.

It also aces the Bechdel Test – Bruce Campbell is, for most of the duration, the sole male presence, and it feels like a statement that initially the *Evil Dead* star doesn't get a single line. His character's daughter Heather is the focus, dispatched to Falburn Academy after torching a tree. Agnes Bruckner holds your attention as this pouty rebel, who draws the attention of the school bully.

> **Feels like your acid tab is just kicking in**

Truth be told, the waspish zinger duels and catfights of this subplot are more engaging than the supernatural thread, which relates to a school legend of three sisters who walked out of the woods 100 years ago, later turning out to be witches. That develops along broadly predictable lines.

Still, there are some imaginative touches, like when some pupils go missing, leaving human-sized piles of leaves beneath their bed covers. And the manipulated colours (Heather, with her blazing red hair, really pops) lend the film a distinctive look – at times, it feels like your acid tab is just kicking in.

Bruckner's do was devised to match this very axe.

Extras This Arrow Video release is a significant step up from the old bare-bones DVD. Lucky McKee is paired with storyboard artist Vanessa McKee (yes, his missus) for an interview covering all the main bases (25 minutes).

A new commentary with the director, moderated by critic Walter Chaw, feels a little too much like an interview playing over the top of the film, though. Ask him about what's on-screen! Previously unseen behind-the-scenes footage from the director's archive (40 minutes) offers glimpses of fight rehearsals and the setup on things like a hanging scene. Plus: storyboards; stills gallery (a whole nine photos!); trailer; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

i McKee gave the Academy's stern Ms Mackinaw a twitch after a teacher at his elementary school who had nerve damage.

LOST IN SPACE

Here's to you, Mrs Robinson

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
1998 | PG | 4K
Director **Stephen Hopkins**
Cast **Gary Oldman, William Hurt, Matt LeBlanc, Mimi Rogers**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Armed with a** floor-filling theme by Apollo 440, *Lost In Space* feels less part of the '90s sci-fi canon than the millennial craze that found Hollywood defibrillating such TV dependables as *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *Charlie's Angels*.

It's a colourful, hyper-caffeinated watch, torn between the bubblegum whimsy of the original series and the more cynical, post-Lucas world that followed (the film's Robot is surely a terrifying cousin to *RoboCop*'s ED-209). The early CG has a janky charm now, but still-impressive practical sets, from ghost starship to ice planet, make it something of a soundstage epic.

Flavour-of-the-moment Matt LeBlanc gets to play Han Solo as Don West, but can't quite shake the sense he's in a particularly trippy episode of *Friends*. William Hurt's interstellar patriarch is simply dull. Gary Oldman, meanwhile, steals the whole senses-assaulting caboodle as the treacherous Dr Smith, eclipsing even Jonathan Harris's small-screen original with a perfectly calibrated blend of menace and razor-edged camp.

Sadly, they didn't include Tybo the talking carrot.

Extras Newly-recorded interviews find director Stephen Hopkins in refreshingly honest mode as he reflects on the film's strengths and flaws (21 minutes), while cinematographer Peter Levy reveals his frustrations with the effects (17 minutes). Screenwriter Akiva Goldsman also proves enjoyably candid as he discusses an essential clash of creative vision with Hopkins (18 minutes), while art director Keith Pain (32 minutes), Henson's Creature Shop's Kenny Wilson (seven minutes) and sound guys Simon Kaye and Robin O'Donohue (18 minutes) provide further insights into production. A video essay by critic Matt Donato offers a persuasively upbeat take, arguing that the film's a '90s time capsule (18 minutes).

Archival extras ported to this 4K version include two commentaries, deleted scenes, bloopers, and featurettes on space travel (10 minutes), the effects (16 minutes) and the TV cast (seven minutes). Plus: a booklet. **Nick Setchfield**

i Jonathan Harris turned down a cameo, saying, "I will have you know I have never done a walk-on or bit part in my life!"

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SHADOWZONE

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
1990 | 18 | Blu-ray EXTRAS ★★½☆☆
Director **JS Cardone**
Cast **Louise Fletcher, David Beecroft, James Hong**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **One of the** earliest releases from Charles Band's Full Moon stable, this is a generic, low-energy affair that even the presence of Oscar winner Louise Fletcher (*One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*'s Nurse Ratched) can't elevate.

It's described as "in the tradition of *Alien*", but the HP Lovecraft flick *From Beyond* seems more of an influence. David Beecroft plays a NASA captain sent to a secret research facility after the death of a subject in the titular project – an ill-defined affair concerning extended deep sleep which somehow opens a gateway to a parallel dimension.

Fourteen-year-old boys who haven't mastered installing a VPN will be delighted that a voluptuous female test subject is gratuitously naked in her pod. Anyone else is likely to be underwhelmed. Fletcher is rather wasted (though there's a drinking game in her character's compulsive lip balm application), the random nature of the shocks may leave you wondering if they just scraped together whatever was sitting around in the effects workshop, and all attempts to crank up the tension are hobbled by a score so minimal it's barely there.

Extras 88 Films' regular Full Moon commentary team Dave Wain and Matty Budrewicz are likeable chaps, but take a good 19 minutes to address anything on-screen, which rather tests your patience. Plus: trailer; A3 poster. **Ian Berriman**

NB: in a rat apocalypse, trousers are advisable.

RATS: NIGHT OF TERROR

Rodent rage

★★☆☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
1984 | 18 | 4K/Blu-ray
Director **Bruno Mattei**
Cast **Jean-Christophe Brétignière, Geretta Geretta, Fausto Lombardi**

This threadbare Italian horror has achieved minor cult classic status in the decades since its release. Following a nuclear holocaust, humanity has split into two distinct tribes, with most fleeing underground while bands of "New Primitives" roam the surface. We follow a squad of these future punks as they investigate an abandoned village, only to be picked off by the titular furry menace.

Rats: Night Of Terror has a certain amount of B-movie charm, with an entertainingly clunky English dub and an outrageous final sting. Still, it's slow and some aspects have aged poorly, notably a racist character name and some real animal cruelty. The new restoration looks beautiful – shame about the film.

Extras Italian cinema experts Eugenio Ercolani and Troy Howarth offer an engaging commentary that establishes the wider context of the film's production, noting that some of the sets were reused from Sergio Leone's crime epic *Once Upon A Time In America*.

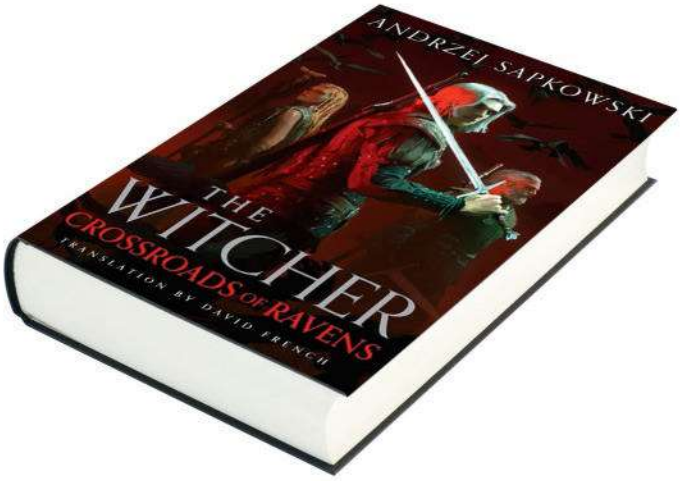
Screenwriter Claudio Fragasso (38 minutes) – sometimes credited as the film's co-director – details his decade-long collaboration with Bruno Mattei. Assistant director Giovanni Leacche (20 minutes) appears in an interview from 2017 discussing his career, the film, and which of the cast he hooked up with! Actors Fausto Lombardi (25 minutes), Ann-Gisel Glass and Jean-Christophe Brétignière (22 minutes) offer amused memories.

This 88 Films edition also carries over two further interviews from the company's 2018 Blu-ray release: composer Luigi Ceccarelli (19 minutes) discusses his score, while stuntmen Massimo Vanni and Ottaviano Dell'Acqua (15 minutes) talk through the practicalities of working with the rats. Plus: a trailer. The dual-format 4K edition comes packaged with a 40-page booklet and art card. **Will Salmon**

i As several interviews on the disc confirm, the "rats" were, in fact, white mice that had been dyed a darker colour.

ROUND UP

A shark horror with a twist, **DANGEROUS ANIMALS** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD) centres on a serial killer who uses the creatures as his weapon of choice: boat trip operator Tucker (Jai Courtney). We said: "Boasts some decent plot twists, and Courtney imbues this land-based predator with a glimmer of roguish charisma." Meagre extras: a four-minute featurette, and two minutes of Courtney threatening talkative cinemagoers with a violent death... Arthouse musical **THE END** (29 September, Blu-ray/DVD) centres on a rich family and their servants, who've been hunkered down in a luxurious bunker for 20 years. When a survivor from the surface turns up, it shakes things up... We said: "The salt mine location provides an eerily beautiful backdrop, and performances are solid... However, it's a relentlessly downbeat affair." Bonuses: interviews with four cast and the composer (73 minutes). Disney's latest live-action redo is **LILO & STITCH** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD). Once again, an escaped alien science experiment hides out in Hawaii with a little girl, causes destruction everywhere he goes, and eventually melts hearts. Extras: about 35 minutes of stuff, including two Making of pieces, Stitch discussing his "favourite scenes", two deleted scenes, and bloopers. We said: "Rather wonderful, centred on an astonishing performance by eight-year-old Maia Kealoha." Finally, the latest TV box sets include **THE LAST OF US** Season Two (22 September, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD) and **MAYFAIR WITCHES** Season Two (out now, Blu-ray/DVD).



CROSSROADS OF RAVENS

Meet the young Geralt

★★★★☆

RELEASED 30 SEPTEMBER
400 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Andrzej Sapkowski**
Publisher **Gollancz**

In all fictional universes, there comes a point when the writer can no longer take a story chronologically forwards. In the case of Andrzej Sapkowski's Witcher sequence, this moment arrived more than a quarter of a century ago, in 1999, when the Polish edition of *The Lady Of The Lake* was first published.

So if Geralt of Rivia's story is done, what should we make of Sapkowski's choice to explore his life in prequels? It's tempting to be cynical. The final book of the Witcher pentalogy wasn't translated into English until 2017, the year Netflix commissioned *The Witcher*. Whisper it, but maybe Sapkowski has given in to the temptation to feed the franchise?

Happily, *Crossroads Of Ravens*, which shows us the misadventures of a teenage Geralt, suggests otherwise. It's a book brimming with energy, grimdark-tinged bleak humour, and new insights into how his early life shaped the older Geralt. In an age when so many fantasy books are doorstoppers that demand a knowledge of what's gone before, it's also a relatively slim volume that can be read as a standalone.

Chronologically, the novel takes place before *The Last Wish* and *Sword Of Destiny*, the volumes of short stories that introduced Polish readers to Geralt in the early '90s. As yet to experience life's disappointments – although a few come along in the novel – Geralt is a callow graduate of the training keep Kaer Morhen.

He's also a young man in a spot of bother, facing hanging after a misguided attempt at heroism goes awry. Enter Preston Holt, a veteran witcher. Holt takes Geralt under his wing, sharpening the young man's combat skills and sending him back into the world better equipped to survive. But does Holt have a hidden agenda?

Without giving away too many spoilers, of course he does, and much of the novel follows Geralt getting dragged into potentially deadly political machinations he barely understands. In this sense, the book is about how experience makes us sceptical of others – and if even a mentor cannot be trusted, how do you carry on?

One answer is that witchers, so often treated with suspicion by the rest of society (until monsters that need killing start to come out of the shadows), have to learn to live with ambiguity. Holt may not be morally upright, but he's by no means evil either, and in the stories' chronology he occupies the place of flawed teacher, the figure his protégé will eclipse.

As for how the plot plays out, *Crossroads Of Ravens* is a curious book in that it often seems to delight in eschewing conventional plot beats as it moves towards a final act in which Geralt is pushed towards contemplating an act of revenge. Instead, it has the feel of two or three novellas tied together. This, you half suspect, may be partly because it's a prequel and Sapkowski is hemmed in to some extent by what will follow.

Then again, Sapkowski has always been an idiosyncratic

> **Brimming with energy and bleak humour**

novelist. Where so many of his contemporaries self-consciously craft vast and complex fantasy worlds, Sapkowski is an economical storyteller who relies more on what you might call an accretion of detail to make his fantasy landscape believable. He's also, as translated here by David French, an unfussy writer. If you're offered a detail, it's because it's important.

Seen in this light, *Crossroads Of Ravens* reframes Geralt of Rivia, albeit subtly, so much so that some fans of the sequence have even speculated Sapkowski is poking fun at the Netflix iteration of the character. Whatever the truth of that, it's a book which, while hardly essential, more than earns its place in the overall sequence. **Jonathan Wright**

i According to Sapkowski, Henry Cavill's voice in *The Witcher* tallies with his own idea of how Geralt would speak.

THE WORLDS OF HAYAO MIYAZAKI

★★★★½

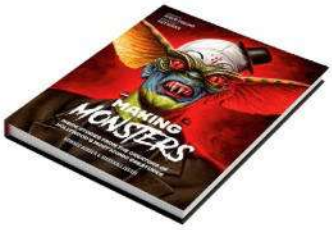
RELEASED 18 SEPTEMBER
224 pages | Hardback/ebook
Author **Nicolas Rapold**
Publisher **Frances Lincoln**

Nicolas Rapold, former editor-in-chief of *Film Comment*, offers an engaging mix of biography, analysis, and illustrated history of the life and works of Studio Ghibli's creative mastermind Hayao Miyazaki.

The book discusses how Miyazaki's films are shaped by his childhood memories of the Second World War, his environmentalism, his mother's long-term illness and the animators who served as his mentors and collaborators, particularly Isao Takahata. Rapold brings insightful analysis to everything from the locations in Miyazaki's films to the influence of Soviet animator Lev Atamanov.

The depth of research is impressive. For example, the chapters on the children's authors who inspired Miyazaki include Hans Christian Andersen and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, plus Japanese novelists Natsume Soseki and Kenji Miyazawa, whose works are little known in the West.

The book is beautifully presented, with each page of prose accompanied by a page of images. Rapold maintains a brisk pace – his section on a TV interview between Miyazaki and Akira Kurosawa offers a tantalising glimpse of said encounter. Brimming with passion for its subject, *The Worlds Of Hayao Miyazaki* will encourage readers to rewatch the director's films with a fresh perspective. **David West**



MAKING MONSTERS

★★★½☆

RELEASED 11 SEPTEMBER

320 pages | Hardback/ebook

Authors **Howard Berger, Marshall Julius**

Publisher **Welbeck**

What makes us love monsters? This coffee-table book from the renowned prosthetic makeup artist Howard Berger and journalist Marshall Julius tries to get to the bottom of the mystery by presenting stories from the people who make them.

Each of the 16 chapters tackles a different subgenre – kaiju, vampires, zombies, slashers, and so on – with quotes from relevant creatives. There's no faulting the contributor list: this is a who's who of horror legends, from creature creator Rick Baker to iconic director John Carpenter, by way of "godfather of gore" Tom Savini and even the legendary Ray Harryhausen. The latter gets a well-deserved chapter dedicated to his incredible contribution to cinema.

It's a light and engaging read, and some of the stories are amusing: Jason Reitman reveals that his father once narrated the plot of *Alien* to him as a campfire story, leading to the young Reitman angrily assuming Ridley Scott had ripped his dad off when he saw the movie. That said, it's not an especially in-depth text, and some of the quotes are a little on the slight side. Still, a clean design and effective imagery help to make this an attractive book that would make the ideal present for any gorehound in your life. **Rob Lockwood**

SLASHED BEAUTIES

★★½☆☆

RELEASED 17 SEPTEMBER

352 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **A Rushby**

Publisher **Verve Books**

There are some intriguing ideas in this horror novel about three mysterious dolls and the antique dealer hunting them down, but none of them sink their teeth in deep enough to make an impact.

Jumping between two time periods, the book follows a young woman in the 1700s who's lured into working in a brothel, and three "Venus" dolls in the modern day that come alive to murder the men who have wronged them.

There are some effectively eerie sequences in the way the anatomical Venuses are described, bringing to mind both the creepy dolls of classic horror films and the porcelain monstrosities found in the houses of grandmothers. There are also neat parallels between the dolls driving their male victims insane and the way beauty can spark obsession, with men often feeling entitled to women's bodies.

But the characterisation of the female protagonists is paper-thin: personality traits amount to things like having a pixie cut and drinking matcha lattes. Plus for a book that's so concerned with sex work in the Georgian era it seems uncomfortable in depicting actual sex, or the abuse women of this era faced. Bonus points for an effective female villain, a manipulative brothel madam, but it could have been so much nastier. **Kimberley Ballard**

MOONFLOW

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

384 pages | Paperback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Bitter Karella**

Publisher **Run For It**

If you go down to the woods today... well, just don't.

Sarah makes her living growing magic mushrooms, so when her best client tells her about a trendy new variant ("The King's Breakfast") she's keen to add them to her catalogue. Thing is, those shrooms only grow in one place, out in the treacherous Pamogo forest. With a park ranger to guide her, Sarah sets out to try to collect the precious spores... and, of course, everything goes horribly wrong.

Stripped back to its basic structure, *Moonflow* sounds kind of like Adam Nevill's *The Ritual*: unsuspecting tourists get lost in the woods and fall into the clutches of a creepy cult. However, the two books couldn't be more dissimilar in tone or aesthetic.

Moonflow is psychedelic, absurdist, and wildly queer: it's a deep dive into philosophies of the divine feminine, as its murderous lesbian sex cult attempts to dismantle a colonialist legend but can't overcome its own prejudices. Your mileage may vary when it comes to the wacky '70s hippie dialogue or the explicit and grotesque sex – but the satire is razor-sharp, and the body horror appropriately gooey.

If there's one comforting thing in this whole nightmare, it's that the welfare of Sarah's poor rescue cat, Herman, is never far from her mind – and that, at least, has a happy ending. **Sarah Dobbs**

THE SECOND DEATH OF LOCKE

★★★½☆

RELEASED 23 SEPTEMBER

480 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

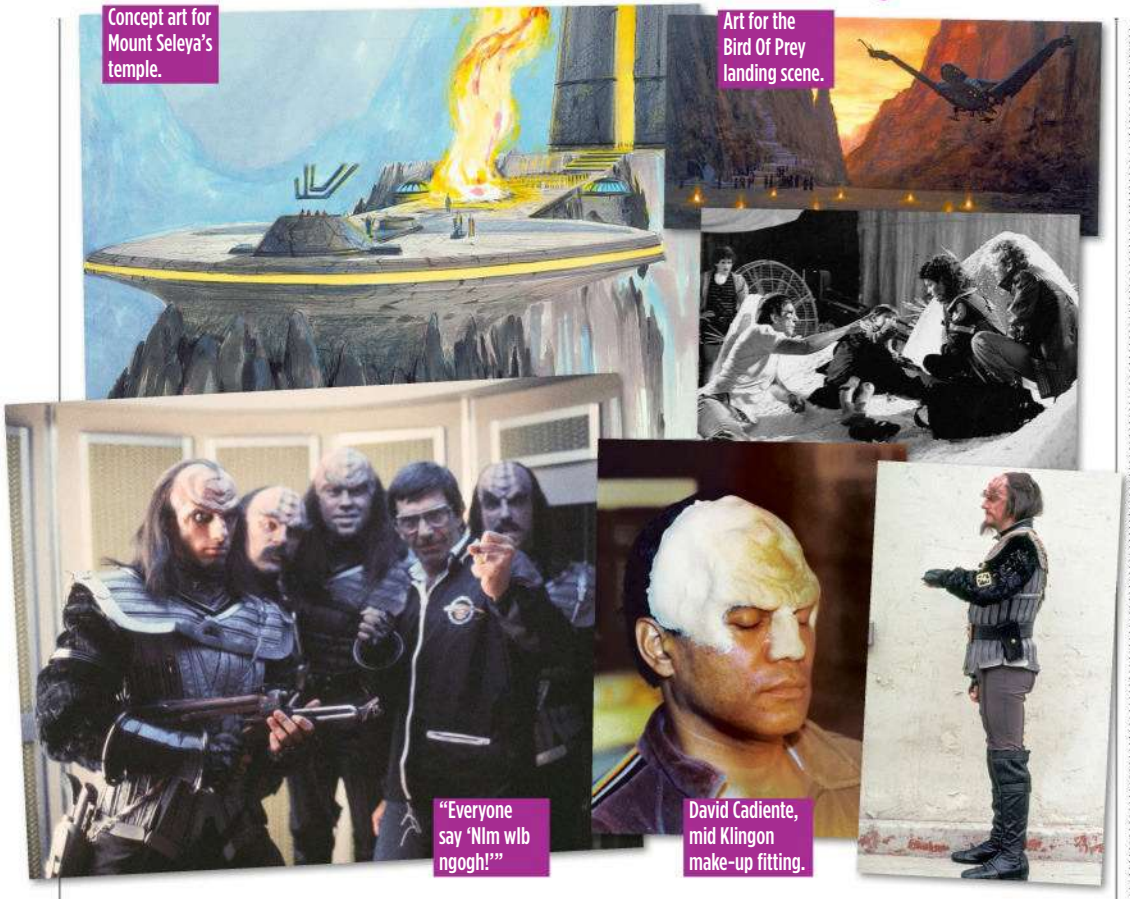
Author **VL Bovalino**

Publisher **Orbit**

There are many different systems of magic across fantasy, from spells and potions to gestures and intuition. Most involve a sense of power within a user (often inherited), which *The Second Death Of Locke* plays with in its system of mages and wells. A "well" is the source of power: a human who is "tethered" to a mage, who wields it. But no wells have been born since the island of Locke vanished 16 years ago, and the countries of Idistra have been at war ever since.

This isn't a war novel, however, it's a romance. The mage and well we follow are Kier and Grey, two soldiers who grew up together after Grey's family was lost, and who love each other passionately – if they'd only admit it. There's a lot more to Grey's past than she's confessed, though...

It's an engaging love story, well told, with compelling worldbuilding. Kier feels too devoted to be real, though – there's seemingly nothing Grey could do to repel him, including some truly horrific acts. And though this is a modern tale in some ways – LGBT characters exist without prejudice, as do female soldiers and leaders – it still falls back on the trope that power in both the magical and political sense is primarily a matter of birth. We're looking forward to picking up the pair's stories in the next instalment, nonetheless. **Rhian Drinkwater**



Concept art for Mount Seleya's temple.

Art for the Bird Of Prey landing scene.

"Everyone say 'Nlm wlb ngogh!'"

David Cadiente, mid Klingon make-up fitting.

THE SEARCH FOR SPOCK: THE MAKING OF THE CLASSIC FILM

Resurrection Man

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

192 pages | **Hardback**

Authors **John Tenuto, Maria Jose Tenuto**

Publisher **Titan Books**

If any film's ill-served by the "even numbered Trek movies good..." theory, it's *The Search For Spock*. Though restricted by having to tidy up the aftermath of *The Wrath Of Khan*, it combines a touching portrait of the lengths people will go to for friendship with some gut-punch surprises.

Understandably, as key players are no longer with us, husband-and-wife team John and Maria Jose Tenuto's coffee table book draws heavily on archival sources, but these are broad in scope and meticulously footnoted. They've also conducted 17 new interviews (including one with William Shatner). Second Saavik Robin Curtis is a valuable contributor, and it's touching to have the son of Phillip R Allen (Captain Esteban) paying tribute.

It's an accessible read, regularly broken up with single- or double-pagers, many focused on particular scenes. Some of these go pretty niche – our favourite documents the day the orangutan from *Every Which Way But Loose* visited the bridge!

While it won't occupy you too long (three or four hours – this range is far less dense than, say, JW Rinzler's *Star Wars* books), it certainly feels comprehensive, covering everything from Harve Bennett's fascinatingly different first treatment to screenings and merch. And there are plenty of visual treats, the most interesting stemming from the effects whizzes at ILM: concept drawings of the Spacedock, Vulcan, Enterprise's destruction, and so on. The needs of the many are fully satisfied.

Ian Berriman

i To keep Spock's fate secret, callsheets credited Leonard Nimoy as "Frank Force", playing "Nacluv" (read it backwards).

SCREAMING AND CONJURING

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

466 pages | **Hardback/ebook**

Author **Clark Collis**

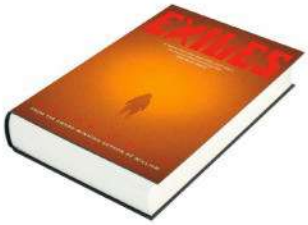
Publisher **1984 Publishing**

Clark Collis's excellent 2021 book *You've Got Red On You* was an absorbing deep dive into the making of *Shaun Of The Dead*. His follow-up has a far broader remit – and he may have bitten off more than needed chewing.

The book focuses on US and UK horror, taking the premiere of *Scream* as its starting point, and setting *The Conjuring* as the finish line. This seems somewhat arbitrary – after all, it's not as if anyone identifies as "a fan of 1997-2013 horror".

An impressive interviewee list ensures most of the longer accounts are not reliant on archival sources – it helps that genre stalwarts like Greg Nicotero and Doug Jones can be pressed into service multiple times. And something like Paul W Anderson's account of *Resident Evil*'s journey to the screen remains interesting even if you have no love for the film.

Unfortunately, while that time-frame includes notable landmarks, it also covers plenty of mediocrity. As the author dutifully maps the trends, your eyes may occasionally glaze over as he catalogues, say, a slew of J-horror remakes. And when he digs into obscurities like Snoop Dogg horror *Bones*, you may question if he really needed to bother. There are useful insights here (and some amusingly frank responses) but the book might have benefitted from a more selective focus, and a ruthless edit. **Calvin Baxter**



EXILES

★★★☆☆

RELEASED **18 SEPTEMBER**

224 pages | **Hardback/ebook/audiobook**

Author **Mason Coile**

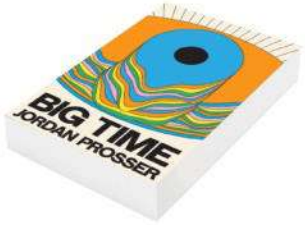
Publisher **Baskerville**

When Earth's first three permanent Mars colonists arrive on the Red Planet, they discover the base that's been pre-assembled for them by three robots has been partially destroyed. One robot is now missing, and the two remaining robots have different stories about what caused the destruction: one blames the missing robot, the other blames an alien creature.

Possibly even stranger than that, the robots have chosen names and sexual identities for themselves. And the "female" robot seems anxious to connect with the female member of the crew. Is it possible some kind of AI sexism is the key to the mystery?

A short, sharp shock of a novel that you could probably finish in one sitting, *Exiles* is a science fiction thriller from Mason Coile, the pseudonym of the late Andrew Pyper, an author who combined literary fiction with genre fiction to much acclaim.

As a whodunnit, it's a true page-turner – pacy, taut and full of twists, though perhaps leaning a little too much into melodrama when it comes to the denouement. As science fiction, it's on rather shakier ground. The "motivation" of the robots (to say more would involve spoilers) is deeply hokey, and feels inspired more by schlocky '80s space movies than the AI era. *Exiles* wants to be *2001*, but it's nearer to *Saturn 3*. **Dave Golder**



BIG TIME

★★★★½

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

368 pages | **Paperback/ebook/audiobook**

Author **Jordan Prosser**

Publisher **Dead Ink**

Anyone who's spent time in or around bands will get a few chuckles of recognition from this terrific debut novel. Somewhere between a disquieting dystopian thriller and a bleakly amusing rock comedy, *Big Time* follows The Acceptables, a punk band suffering from difficult second album syndrome. Singer Ash wants to push the group in a politically-charged direction, but in an authoritarian future Australia, that carries real risks.

Meanwhile, a new drug has hit the streets. F allows its users brief glimpses into the future. It's not long before The Acceptables are hooked on the drug, with bassist Julian Ferryman seeing further than anyone has before – and that changes everything.

Jordan Prosser's novel radiates confidence from the off. *Big Time* is bitingly acerbic, but also full of warmth for its flawed, self-destructive characters. Despite the laughs, there's a lingering air of tragedy – we're repeatedly reminded that this will be The Acceptables' final album, and that a dark fate awaits some of these people.

Interspersed with intriguing vignettes about strange temporal events that are happening around the world, *Big Time* has a tendency to ramble on, but Prosser's writing is so humane, entertaining, and packed with intriguing ideas that it's easy to forgive a few moments of rock 'n' roll excess. **Will Salmon**

SIN BIN ISLAND

★★★½☆

RELEASED **11 SEPTEMBER**

400 pages | **Paperback**

Author **Doug Naylor**

Publisher **David Fickling Books**

He's been back to reality and back to Earth. Now *Red Dwarf* co-creator Doug Naylor goes back to school with this entertaining kids' novel.

Cyril Sniggs's Correctional Orphanage For Wayward Boys And Girls is an unorthodox educational establishment, working to an ancient curriculum laid down by pirates. Every year its Dickensian disciplinary system punishes four children with a week's exile on the eponymous Sin Bin Island, a remote, seemingly haunted rock nestled in lamprey-infested waters.

It goes without saying that the recently bereaved Jack "Digs" Digby is miffed when his late mum's will informs him that this is where he'll be continuing his education. Luckily, it's also the ideal location for some early teen high jinks, as Digs and his mates become embroiled in a *Goonies*-esque adventure involving magic, treasure and a clairvoyant Russian nesting doll.

The book's undeniably formulaic, built around an academic year structure and the long-standing trope of young heroes battling a system stacked against them. But Naylor puts his own stamp on proceedings via the offbeat setting, some inventive twists and a relatable gang of heroes. Elements of *Red Dwarf* also shine through in the story's more surreal moments, alongside bizarre character names and enough evocative metaphors to make Lister and the posse proud. **Richard Edwards**

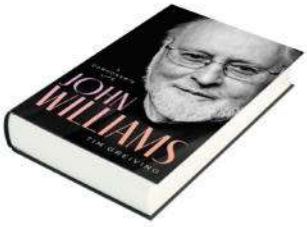
REISSUES

This month's biggest paperback is Stephen King's latest collection, **YOU LIKE IT DARKER**

(★★★★☆, 11 September, Hodder). It features 12 tales, all previously unpublished, including the novella-length "Rattlesnakes", a ghost story which sees the return of Vic Trenton, grieving father of the boy killed by a rabid St Bernard in *Cujo*. We said: "Features an awful lot of old men nearing death, and coming to terms with it in different ways... even the lesser stories are, if not wholly satisfying, rattlingly good reads." Haruki Murakami's latest, **THE CITY AND ITS UNCERTAIN WALLS** (out now, ★★★★☆, Vintage), is a slice of enigmatic magical realism that's tricky to describe,

being split between our reality and a shadowless walled city where the narrator works as a "dream reader" in a library. We said: "A sideways, thoughtful and sometimes playful journey into how we understand ourselves and who we want to be." The first part of a duology, **THE FROZEN PEOPLE** (★★★★½, 11 September, Quercus) sees Elly Griffiths (author of the Ruth Galloway series) adding a dash of sci-fi to her crime, as a cold-case team investigate past crimes by time-travelling back to witness who did what. Its protagonist is detective Ali Dawson, who travels back to London in January

1850 to clear the name of a Tory MP's ancestor, then finds she can't get home again. We said: "There's a grubby reality to Griffiths's descriptions of life in London past and present, while the book's slow-burn mystery is fab."



JOHN WILLIAMS: A COMPOSER'S LIFE

★★★★½

RELEASED OUT NOW!

640 pages | Hardback/ebook/ audiobook

Author **Tim Greiving**

Publisher **Oxford University Press**

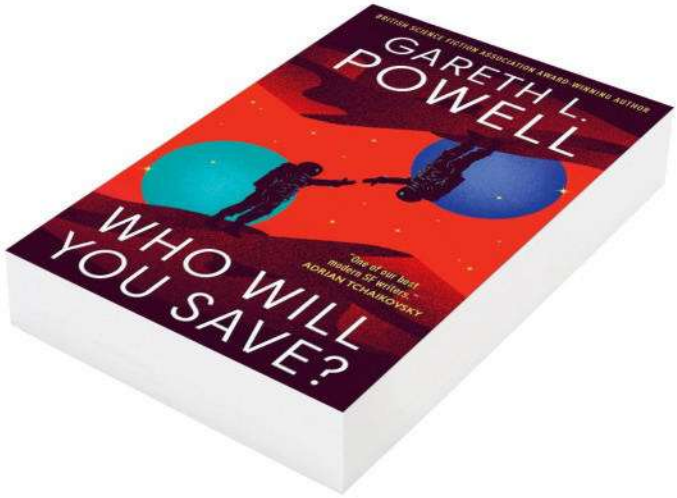
***A Composer's Life*, it's** called, but even the briefest glance at John Williams's resume reminds you that his music is *all* our lives. From *Jaws* to *Star Wars*, *Jurassic Park* to *Schindler's List*, his scores are ingrained in our memories as much as the movies elevated by his talent.

This weighty biography has a challenge on its hands. Williams is famously guarded, content to be a familiar thumbnail sketch: the beard and dome, the baton, the jazzer's black rollneck. He resisted this writer's overtures until finally thawing, making this the first authorised life story of the man *Superman* director Richard Donner said "took these popcorn myths as seriously as church".

Using new interviews, including conversations with Williams himself, Tim Greiving traces the rise from Air Force bandsman to TV journeyman to cinema legend. It's a dense, literate read, one that never entirely penetrates its subject's protective shell – a telling flashpoint is the tragic death of his wife, Barbara, in 1974; Williams refuses to speak about it even to his children, while later immortalising her in a violin concerto – but which illuminates his work with brilliant insight.

Perhaps the most startling revelation? "I never go to the movies," Williams confesses.

Nick Setchfield



WHO WILL YOU SAVE?

The Powell Service

★★★★½

RELEASED 16 SEPTEMBER

422 pages | Paperback/ebook

Author **Gareth L Powell**

Publisher **Titan Books**

In the tradition of *The* *Twilight Zone*, *Inside No 9* and all the best anthologies, this tour through Gareth L Powell's back catalogue is a gloriously eclectic affair. *Who Will You Save?* features short stories seeing the light of day for the first time, along with tales that previously appeared in the likes of *Interzone* (simian flight ace short "Ack-Ack Macaque", for example), and the author's own collections.

There really is a little bit of everything among the 32 titles here. The book covers the extremes of the SF spectrum, from hard space opera to Earth-based alien visitations, via zombies, borderline vampires and close encounters of the romantic kind. Some stories aren't even SF at all.

Backdrops take in everything from Powell's native Bristol (a recurring location) to distant black holes, while the page counts range from 31 all the way down to a mere two. The author also has a knack for attention-grabbing story names, from the ever-pertinent "What Would Nicolas Cage Do?" to the lengthy, Philip K Dick-esque "From The Table Of My Memory I'll Wipe Away All Trivial Fond Records".

Whatever subgenre Powell is exploring, he's a master storyteller. There's an impressive efficiency to his plotting, alongside powerful, evocative descriptions, and characters and settings introduced with minimal fuss. Even when the author returns to the established universe of his *Embers Of War* novels, you never feel you should have done your homework in advance – take note, Marvel – while he consistently finds the humanity in his characters, ordinary people and self-aware starships alike.

> **"There's an impressive efficiency to his plotting"**

If we have a criticism it's that the conclusions of several stories lack impact, but within short-form media *Who Will You Save?* is not alone in that. Besides, in many of the stories, the journey is much more important than the destination. **Richard Edwards**

i The name of the collection refers to Powell's sci-fi spin on the "trolley problem", a classic philosophical conundrum.

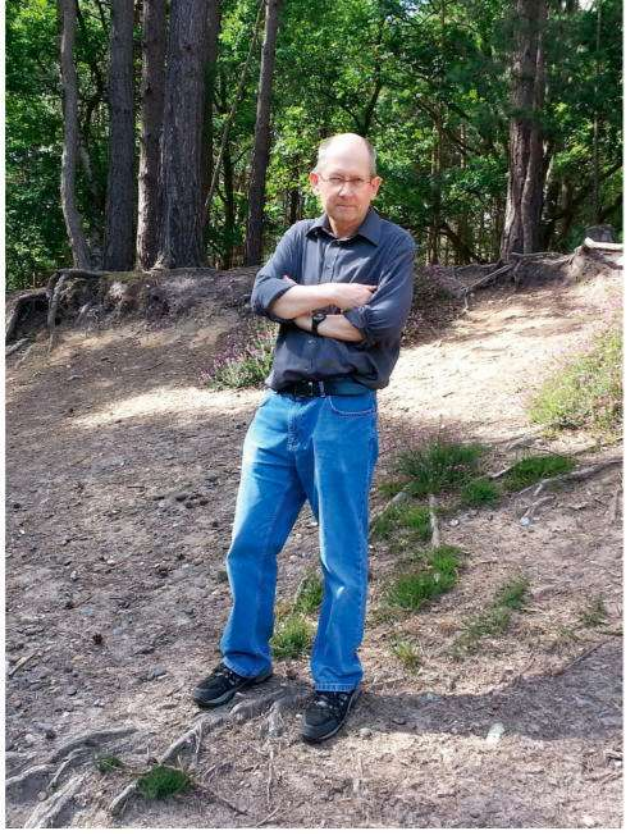
ALSO OUT

There are plenty more books we couldn't fit in – and you can tell Halloween's looming... SenLinYu's dark fantasy **ALCHEMISED** (23 September, Michael Joseph) started out as "Manacled", a piece of Harry Potter fanfic set in a dystopian universe where Voldemort won the war. After racking up 20 million downloads, it's now been "reimagined" as a standalone. The latest in a series of crossovers which bring together the Doctor and public-domain characters, Paul Magrs's **DOCTOR WHO: DRACULA** (out now, BBC Children's Books) sees the first Doctor investigating a string of murders in Whitby. JS Barnes previously wrote a sequel to Bram Stoker's most famous work. His latest, **FRANKENSTEIN'S MONSTER** (out now, Titan), does the same for Mary Shelley's classic, following a folklorist in rural England whose life is disrupted by the arrival of a mysterious doctor... Centred on a boy with an imaginary friend, Ramsey Campbell's latest horror, **AN ECHO OF CHILDREN** (out now, Flame Tree) is described as "the anti-*Exorcist*", a book which "takes the view that the exorcism of children is a form of child abuse". The first release by new horror publisher Black Crow Books, Keith Rosson's **COFFIN MOON** (out now) is set in 1975, and sees a Vietnam vet embarking on a quest for vengeance after a vampiric criminal murders his wife. Finally, Matt Glasby has updated **THE BOOK OF HORROR** (out now, Frances Lincoln), his 2020 guide to post-war horror films. The second edition adds chapters on the likes of *Host*, *Talk To Me* and *Longlegs* – all with suitably creepy charcoal illustrations.

THE WRITE STUFF
THE SFX AUTHOR QUESTIONNAIRE

Stephen Baxter

The hard SF writer wishes he was a spaceman, the fastest guy alive



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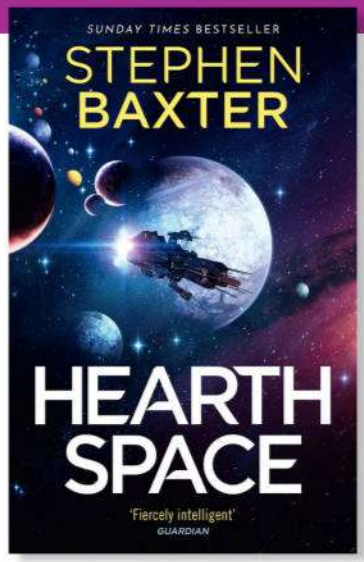


Describe the room in which you typically write.

My study is a small downstairs room with a fitted desk, and shelves mostly occupied by references. Work in progress spills over to the sofa. One visitor said this room is like being inside my own exploded brain.

Do you have any personal mementos on your desk?

A magnificent Fireball XL5. My first love! Those shows were genius, with on the one hand their big-eyed kid-friendly puppets, and on the other their fantastically detailed engineering. The tie–in comics and annuals had cutaway drawings delivered by artists who only a couple of decades earlier had been working on specifications of Spitfires and Hurricanes. I pored over these things – and I acquired the sense of the future as a place, to explore. The essence of science fiction.

Which of your books are you the most proud of?

I would have to say the first, *Raft*, just because it was the culmination of many years of effort – and was a bridge to the future. But my first short story sales had been set in my Xeelee universe, the background to *Raft*, which had already grown into a big sweeping intergalactic saga. I think this is not an uncommon way to start this kind of universe-building: short fiction establishing a background, getting feedback from the readers, and moving on.

> **Like being inside my own exploded brain**

Which of your books was the most difficult to write?

The Long Earth series, with Terry Pratchett, as we worked through Terry's decline. But Terry was chuffed to have a place on the SF shelves – his early model was SF not fantasy, Clarke not Tolkien.

Were you a reader as a child?

Always a great reader. After *Just William*, aged about 11, I migrated to my secondary school library, with its battered copies of the likes of Bradbury, Clarke and Asimov. And I never looked back.

What would be your desert island book?

The War Of The Worlds. I wrote a sequel for this. Professionally HG Wells was a scientist, and I believe his work has not been fully apprehended by the humanities-based literary establishment. On my island I could study that to my heart's content!

Which SF/fantasy book published in the last year has most impressed you?

Alien Clay by Adrian Tchaikovsky.

What's the best – or oddest – gift you've received from a reader?

Perhaps the strangest (but very touching) fannish gift was at a Worldcon. I was introduced to a Japanese origami expert, who was making folded-paper models of some of the craft in my books. His Xeelee nightfighter was a wonder to behold!

What's the best piece of writing advice you've ever received?

From an English teacher in my secondary school, who turned out to be a spare-time writer of radio dramas. I was already writing SF stories, but he told me bluntly that I had to type them up, submit them, and even gave me a start by providing the address of a Harry Harrison anthology. I didn't make that sale! But it was a start.

Hearthspace is out on 25 September, published by Gollancz.

Fireball XL5: Baxter's SF first love.

AP FILMS/ITV

ULTIMATE SPIDER-MAN: INCURSION

Miles apart

★★½☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Marvel Comics**
Writers **Deniz Camp, Cody Ziglar**
Artist **Jonas Scharf**

ISSUES 1-3 **Some crossovers are** simply inevitable, and it was only a matter of time before Marvel's new iteration of the Ultimate Universe found a way of linking its various titles.

The chosen route for this first example was actually set up back in 2023's *Ultimate Invasion* miniseries, where Spider-Man Miles Morales was offered the chance to join the evil Maker (aka "Ultimate" Reed Richards) in the new universe he was about to shape, thanks to them both being the only survivors of the original Ultimate Universe.

While Miles turned the offer down, the plot here is kicked off when his baby sister Billie accidentally sets off the "card" the Maker left in case Miles ever changed his mind, and is immediately transported into Ultimate Universe 2.0.

The resulting five-issue miniseries follows Miles as he quests across this alternate world to rescue Billie, who's now being hunted by various sinister forces thanks to her status as a multiversal anomaly.

The "world tour" setup means that Miles is crossing over with a different Ultimate title in each issue, and these first three instalments see him meeting up with the new versions of Ultimate Spider-Man, Ultimate Black Panther and the Ultimate X-Men.

Scripting duties are being handled by Deniz Camp and Cody Ziglar, and they're delivering a lightweight superhero adventure that's fun, but also unintentionally highlights the weaknesses of the current Ultimate Universe.

Camp and Ziglar have a good handle on the characterisation of Miles, and are clearly having the most fun in the first issue, dealing with the interplay between multiple Spider-Men. There's a handful of strong action set-pieces and some effective art from Jonas Scharf, but the breakneck pacing means that the series never stops feeling like a grab-bag of episodic ideas rather than a properly compelling story.

It also doesn't help that the central "Billie Morales keeps getting kidnapped by different villains" plotline has begun to feel contrived by the end of the third issue. The biggest problem, however, is that what should be an effective jumping-on point for new readers instead feels like a bit of history homework.

The story keeps getting bogged down in the ultra-complicated lore of this new Ultimate Universe (and Miles's connection to it), and the contrast between this and DC's far more accessible Absolute Universe titles couldn't be stronger. Those who've been following the Ultimate saga will still enjoy this, but for everyone else, *Ultimate Spider-Man: Incursion* can't help feeling like a missed opportunity. **Saxon Bullock**

Pay attention; there's going to be a lore test later.
Sorry, Spot, but I'm the only one doin' it like me!
Oh, didn't see y'all. Guess he was right!
CRACK
Gfhhgt!

i Camp is also writing *Ultimate Endgame*, the climax to this phase of the Ultimate Universe, which begins in December 2025.

SYSTEM PREFERENCE

★★★½☆

RELEASED **23 SEPTEMBER**
Publisher **Titan Comics**
Writer/artist **Ugo Bienvenu**

COLLECTION **"No one creates** anymore, they just recycle," says a character during this original graphic novel from French writer/artist Ugo Bienvenu. It's a pointed line, and one that could apply to this book too, which feels like a riff on Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* for the Instagram age.

It's the near future and Yves is an archivist. His department has been tasked with deleting 8,000 teraoctets of data in order to keep the world's social media running – and so out goes *2001: A Space Odyssey*, out goes the works of WH Auden, and so on. Taking files scheduled for deletion home is forbidden, but that's exactly what Yves is doing – and that puts his family in danger.

System Preference is being billed as a "*Black Mirror*-esque future-shock satire" by the publishers. But while this is a beautifully-drawn book with some gorgeous individual moments, the satirical elements feel blunt and didactic – an ongoing gag that Yves's wife is working on a Playmobil show feels particularly reductive in a post-*Barbie*, post-*The Lego Movie* age.

Around the midpoint, however, Bienvenu takes a big narrative swing which pays off. The second half pushes the story in a more unpredictable direction, switching viewpoints to deliver an empathetic and powerfully emotional ending that finds hope in both nature and technology. **Will Salmon**

TRINITY: DAUGHTER OF WONDER WOMAN

★★★★☆

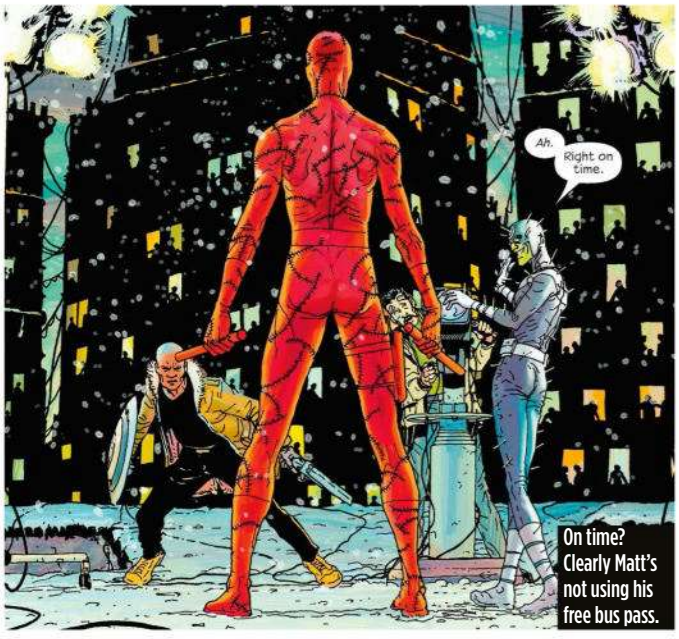
RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **DC Comics**
Writer **Tom King**
Artist **Belén Ortega**

ISSUES 1-3 **First introduced as** part of writer Tom King's current run on *Wonder Woman*, Trinity is the Amazon heroine's daughter. This six-issue miniseries is the first time she's headlined her own title.

It's a tale that broadcasts its status as a deeply silly time travel comedy within the first few pages. The plot focuses on three different incarnations of Trinity – child, teenager, and grown-up – as they come together to fix some accidental damage to the space-time continuum (and maybe reverse the death of their father, Steve Trevor, at the same time).

Most of King's previous comic work has been bracingly dark and adult, so it's easy to be thrown by the *incredibly* goofy and slapstick-heavy tone of these first three issues. There's also barely any explanation of Trinity's involved backstory, as well as a lot of gags that require strong knowledge of DC continuity – and yet, despite being undeniably messy, this is turning out to be a massively charming and engaging read.

The manga-influenced art from Belén Ortega is brilliantly expressive, and King pulls off moments of genuine emotion. While the knockabout tone and frequent corgi-related puns won't be for everyone, so far this is one of 2025's most unexpectedly enjoyable superhero comics. **Saxon Bullock**



DAREDEVIL: COLD DAY IN HELL

SFX Loves

Matt finish?

★★★★★

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Marvel Comics**
Writers **Charles Soule, Steve McNiven**
Artist **Steve McNiven**

ISSUES 1-3 **With Frank Miller** having risen to prominence on *Daredevil*, it's apt that Hornhead should receive the *Dark Knight Returns* treatment in this enthralling three-parter. Indeed, the spirit of Miller – who contributes a couple of pared-back variant covers – looms large over both Charles Soule and Steve McNiven's story and the latter's art, which pays direct homage to a few key panels of Miller's classic '80s run.

It's set several years in the future, with an elderly, depowered Matt Murdock regaining his abilities for a limited time after being caught in a chemical explosion. Echoing *Daredevil: Born Again*'s super-soldier subplot, he encounters a dying Captain America, who asks him to save a mysteriously powered young girl from his nemesis Bullseye, who is elevated to the main Big Bad.

There's a fair amount of gallows humour about neither character being at the top of their game. Matt is also frequently saved by others – be it an ageless Electra or, in one memorable sequence, a limbless Punisher in an Iron Man suit.

With Matt and Bullseye's wizened faces standing out, Steve McNiven not only channels Miller with his muscular figures – although his linework is more refined – but other *Daredevil* artists, such as David Mazzucchelli and Alex Maleev. Despite sometimes including up to 12 panels on a page, his layouts never look over-crammed.

With a collected edition due in February, this is a stone-cold classic for the ages. **Stephen Jewell**

i Frank Miller began pencilling *Daredevil* in 1979, before taking over the writing of the series as well in 1981, on issue 168.

THUNDERBIRDS COMIC ANTHOLOGY

Volume One

★★★★★

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Anderson Entertainment**
Writer **Unknown**
Artists **Eric Eden, Frank Bellamy**

COLLECTION **While the** Thunderbirds strips from *TV Century 21* have been reprinted before, this new anthology is impressively comprehensive. It begins with the Lady Penelope strips that appeared almost a year before *Thunderbirds* itself arrived on TV, taking up around a third of the book's 296 pages.

Written with pace and panache, the opening storyline chronicles how Lady Penelope first met safecracker and chauffeur Parker. Initially pitting the duo against evil robot Mr Steelman, their adventures have a Steed and Mrs Peel spy-fi air about them.

Artist Eric Eden brings a warmth and humour to what were marionette figures, and he draws a mean FAB 1. And unlike Frank Bellamy's inaugural Thunderbirds strip – which was initially allocated the colour centre spread and a further black and white page – Eden's Lady Penelope two-pagers are reproduced in full colour.

In contrast to Eden's more cartoony linework, there's an illustrative, almost photo-realistic approach to Bellamy's art as he expertly captures not only the likenesses of the Tracy brothers but also the various Thunderbirds craft.

"Dateline 2066" news pages are also reproduced, and essays dotted throughout profile the creatives and chart the history of the strips. **Stephen Jewell**

TALES OF THE SHIRE

Hobbit farming, but not habit forming

★★★☆☆

- **RELEASED OUT NOW!**
- Reviewed on **PC**
- Also available on **PS5, Nintendo Switch, Xbox Series X/S**
- Publisher **Private Division**

VIDEOGAME **On paper, JRR** Tolkien's Hobbits should make the perfect relaxing life-sim, rivalling even the likes of genre titans *Stardew Valley* and *Animal Crossing*, for Halflings are simple, hairy-footed folk who love farmed land, hearty food, and pleasant company above all else. However, Wētā Workshop's new Hobbit-focused game will struggle to keep you content for the long haul, despite its developer's obvious love for Middle-earth.

Set years before Frodo Baggins embarks on his journey to destroy the One Ring, *Tales Of The Shire* lets you create your own Hobbit, and follows you settling into the community of Bywater. In a simple yet meditative loop, you can farm, fish, cook, and decorate your Hobbit hole, as you host dinner parties to build relationships with your new neighbours. You'll also find various *The Lord Of The Rings* Easter eggs as you explore.

A standout element of the game that sets it apart from other titles is its delightfully Tolkien-like approach to "success". Doing away with any form of money farming, you need to increase friendships, as you keep track of Hobbits' daily cravings. It's a unique twist on a life-sim that works perfectly with the game's most developed feature: cooking. However, for all the creative ideas, even *Tales Of The Shire*'s greatest moments ultimately feel unsatisfying.

All your activities are separate from the main story, which centres on completing fetch quests to get Bywater recognised as a village. This feels like an afterthought – you don't need to unlock anything to get to the game's epilogue. With a fast story, no seasonal events, and no daily character chats, it's hard to stay invested.

This is a perfectly fine "cosy game". However, it feels rather empty, despite being set in one of the richest fantasy worlds ever created. If you're after pure relaxation and don't mind repetition, you won't regret moving to Bywater, but you may, like Bilbo and the Tooks, suffer from the occasional bout of wanderlust. **Emma-Jane Betts**

i Bywater was the site of the last military engagement of the War of the Ring, after Frodo and his friends returned home.

Forget currency; friendship's your treasure.

DOCTOR WHO: THE RETURN OF THE DOCTOR

★★★☆☆

- **RELEASED OUT NOW!**
- Running time **65 minutes**
- Format **CD/download**
- Publisher **Big Finish**

AUDIO DRAMA **"And the award** for the Most Generic *Doctor Who* Story Title goes to..."

In fact, *The Return Of The Doctor* has a solid reason for its nondescript name. The story opens with the Thirteenth Doctor (Jodie Whittaker) and Yaz (Mandip Gill) wrapping up an adventure on an alien world. Having teamed up with Talpa (Will Kirk) to save the day, the Doctor is keen to move on. Yaz, however, is starting to question the Doctor's instinct to keep running, and so the TARDIS returns to Velazaar years later. In the time they've been away, things have changed for the worse – and it's all the Doctor's fault. Meanwhile, Yaz is haunted by a mysterious voice...

Surprisingly few *Who* stories touch on the consequences of the Doctor rocking up, destabilising a planet and leaving. Rory Thomas-Howes's script probes at the Thirteenth Doctor's reasons for doing so, and at Yaz's growing sense that she still doesn't entirely know her best space pal.

It's interesting stuff, though hindered by grating "quirky" dialogue for the Doctor, and the bizarre choice to give all the Zaarians West Country accents beneath a vocodered alien effect. Still, the central concept is solid, and Whittaker and Gill remain a dynamic duo, lending even the dafter moments passion and grit. **Will Salmon**

MERCHANTS OF ANDROMEDA

★★★½☆

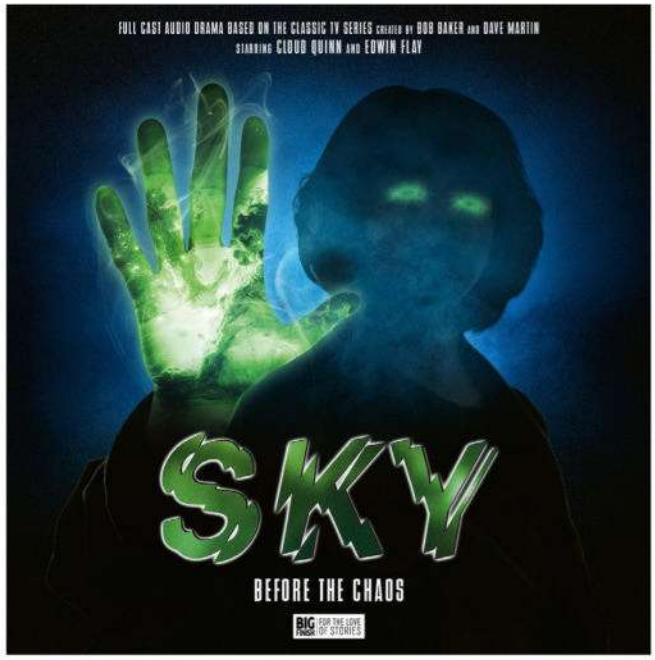
RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Number of players **3-5**
Publisher **Allplay**

BOARDGAME ***Merchants Of Andromeda*** is all about space money, as players attempt to gather as much interstellar cash as they can by spreading influence across several different minigame-like boards – all at the same time, to earn as much as possible during score events.

Whether it's crafting the longest lines on the Station board or casting the most votes in the Senate to trigger a specific ability, three actions per round – Resource, Influence and Auction – enable you to plan out exactly what you want to do before you do it. This is a layered strategy game, and one not best suited to more cautious players.

The third action is the most mechanically important, as winning a Dutch auction between players for that card grants a Resource *and* an Influence action. You want more actions so you can spread more influence across more boards, but how much are you willing to pay when you also need to have the most money at the end of the game?

You need to balance putting in enough influence to matter with ensuring you don't lose position elsewhere. Despite the fact that the number of pieces and boards can be overwhelming, both the mechanics and theme are out of this world. Just be prepared for plenty of explaining and rulebook reading. **Rollin Bishop**


FULL CAST AUDIO DRAMA BASED ON THE CLASSIC TV SERIES CREATED BY BOB BAKER AND DAVE MARTIN
STARRING CLOUD QUINN AND EDWIN FLAY
SKY
BEFORE THE CHAOS
BIG FINISH FOR THE LOVE OF STORIES

SKY: BEFORE THE CHAOS

Into The Woods

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
182 minutes | **Download**
Publisher **Big Finish**

AUDIO DRAMA **With a vinyl** soundtrack recently released and now this revival from Big Finish, 2025 is unexpectedly turning into the summer of *Sky*! The brilliantly spooky 1975 British TV serial, by K-9 creators Bob Baker and Dave Martin, starred Marc Harrison as an alien who materialises on Earth and then spends seven episodes tittering about in the woods. It was cryptic, unsettling – and largely incomprehensible.

Big Finish's *Sky* is a sequel to the show, rather than a remake, and features an entirely new cast, with Cloud Quinn replacing Harrison (who appears to have dropped off the acting map) in the title role. It's the present day and Arby Vennor (Edwin Flay), who once saved the world with Sky, has grown old and bitter. Meanwhile, wealthy Rhea Holmes (Rachel Handshaw) and teenagers Bex (Jessica Hayles) and Kyle (Samuel Morgan-Davies) are drawn to a burial mound in Stanton Cheyney. Sky is returning to Earth and everything is about to change...

> **"Doesn't abandon the eerie atmosphere of the original"**

It's slightly unnerving how well-cast Quinn is as the reborn alien messiah. He perfectly captures both Harrison's voice and the character's deliberately slightly blank line delivery. Gary Russell's script – a few moments of ripe dialogue aside – evokes the spirit of the original show well while expanding the scope of the story and moving things in a new, John Wyndham-esque direction. It's easier to follow than the TV show, but doesn't abandon the eerie atmosphere of the original. The story continues with next year's *Sky: Into The Chaos*. **Will Salmon**

i As a teen, *Sky* co-creator Bob Baker played clarinet in a jazz band; future satirist John Fortune was on trombone.

DEAD TAKE

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Format **PC**
Publisher **Pocketpair Publishing**

VIDEOGAME **If you've ever** wanted to snoop around the many rooms in a film director's swanky Hollywood mansion while handsome men shout in your face, you're in luck.

Dead Take is a first-person psychological horror game that bridges the space between walking sim, interactive movie and puzzler. Placed in the shoes of wannabe actor Chase Lowry (Neil Newbon), you arrive at the home of legendary director Duke Cain in search of a fellow actor – your younger, far more successful friend, Vinny Monroe (Ben Starr), who's no longer answering his phone.

To figure out what happened to him, you must pick through the messy aftermath of one *hell* of a party. Flash drives containing snatches of video evidence can be found around the building, and by splicing the footage together in Duke's home cinema, secrets buried just beneath the floorboards start to seep through.

A cautionary tale exposing the true price of celebrity, *Dead Take*'s biggest thrills don't shout – they whisper disturbingly. It's a little on the short side, and the handful of jump scares feel like cheap shots alongside the far more sinister, suggestive horrors at play. But if you're looking for a powerfully disturbing way to spend three to six hours, Surgent Studios' latest is packed to the teeth with talent and terror, and will haunt you long after the credits roll. **Jasmine Gould-Wilson**

AUGUST 2002

SFX's time machine hurls us back to a random month once again

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

Signs: not the corniest movie on Mel Gibson's CV.

TOUCHSTONE/THA/SHUTTERSTOCK

FLASHBACK

Circular Thinking

2 AUGUST 2002 In 1996, *Independence Day* made a global spectacle of alien invasion, unleashing widescreen violence on the world's famous landmarks. Six years later, M Night Shyamalan's *Signs* offered an altogether more focused take.

"This movie is all on a farm, all one family, in one place," said Hollywood's newly crowned king of rug pulls as he jumped genres from the postmodern ghost story of *The Sixth Sense* and the comic book fable of *Unbreakable* to this nervy, UFO-themed chiller. "And so when you leave it you'll know what it felt like to be on this farm, and be with this family, during this very horrific time."

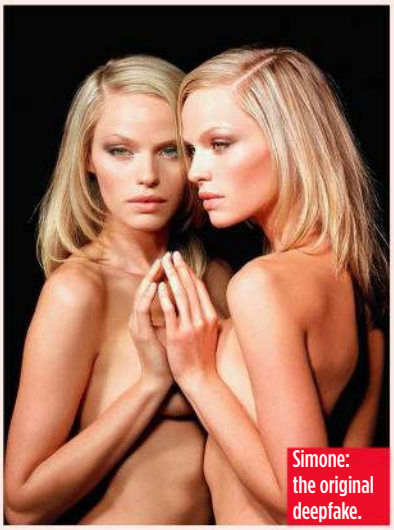
Paul Newman and Clint Eastwood were both approached to play lapsed priest Graham Hess before the part went to Mel Gibson.

Set among the whispering cornfields of rural Pennsylvania, *Signs* took inspiration from the Kelly-Hopkinsville encounter of 1955, in which a remote Kentucky farmhouse was allegedly menaced by extraterrestrial "goblins". Spielberg nearly brought the incident to the screen as a horror movie called *Night Skies*, which eventually mutated into the far sweeter *ET*.

Shyamalan had cinematic touchstones in mind too, namechecking such paranoia-steeped classics as the original *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers* and *Night Of The Living Dead*. Most of all he wanted to channel the dark spirit of *The Birds*, staging an escalating sequence of unnatural events that begins with gnawingly strange portents – in this case the mysterious appearance of crop circles rather than crows massing on telegraph lines – and climaxes in the confines of a single house. He reportedly screened Hitchcock's classic for cast and crew numerous times during filming.

Ironically, *Signs*' most memorable moment occurs far from the besieged homestead – even if we're watching it alongside a freaked-out Joaquin Phoenix in the basement. A breaking news report brings us shaky camcorder footage from a children's birthday party in Brazil. Among the screams of the kids we catch our first, heart-stabbing look at an extraterrestrial, stalking the streets like a spindly demon. The tape rewinds and the blurred intruder stands, frozen, ready to step into our nightmares.

The shoot began two days after 9/11. "The air was supercharged," Shyamalan recalled. It's easy to imagine a little of that jittery, wounded America crept into the film itself.



Simone: the original deepfake.

LANCE STAEDLER/THA/SHUTTERSTOCK

Performance Anxiety

23 AUGUST 2002 Andrew Niccol scored an Oscar nomination for writing *The Truman Show*, the tale of a real person in an unreal world. Follow-up *S1m0ne* – which Niccol not only wrote but directed – flipped that scenario. Skewering the emptiness of celebrity culture in the new millennium, it stars Al Pacino as an auteur director in a career tailspin. Facing a mutiny by his leading lady, he replaces her with a "synthespian" named Simone – derived from Simulation One – a digital avatar that he passes off as flesh and blood.

It's a deception that was echoed in the movie's marketing. Canadian model Rachel Roberts played the title character, but New Line Cinema kept her identity secret to preserve the illusion that Simone was entirely computer-generated. During production, Roberts was brought to set in a wig and dark glasses and worked under the alias Anna Green – a play on anamorphic greenscreen. Denied a credit in the movie itself, she did the press tour in character, supplying pre-recorded answers via TV monitors. Only later was she outed as a human being. "It's really strange having to tell everyone you're real," she reflected. In fact, she was so real she went on to marry her director.

The Truman Show was a timely satire of reality TV that connected with critics and audiences alike. *S1m0ne* had none of its acclaim or box office success, but now feels strikingly prescient. In our hyper-real age of digital Abbatars, reanimated Luke Skywalkers and AI-spawned Instagrammers, it's increasingly apparent that this movie served up some prophecy along with the popcorn.

It was a good year for retailers of leather coats.

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In It To Win It

16 AUGUST 2002 Issue 95 of this illustrious organ found us running the full results of our 2002 Reader Awards, which had been presented at the *SFX* Event in Blackpool on 22 June. Pitched on the cover as a *Buffy* vs *Farscape* showdown, it's now a fascinating snapshot of early '00s geekdom.

The Lord Of The Rings: The Fellowship Of The Ring was voted Best Movie – *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* came a noble second – with Sir Ian McKellen winning Best Movie Actor and *The Others* star Nicole Kidman Best Movie Actress. *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* pipped *Farscape* to be crowned Best TV Series, while Sarah Michelle Gellar won Best TV Actress and James Marsters Best TV Actor. As for who was tickling your hormones, that's another triumph for cover star Marsters as Sexiest Man, while Gellar lost to *Farscape*'s Claudia Black as Sexiest Woman. *Buffy*'s "Once More, With Feeling" bagged Best Individual Episode.

Most Godlike Being? Joss Whedon... now that's sobering.

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IN REAL LIFE

- **Prime Minister:** Tony Blair
- **US President:** George W Bush
- **In the charts:** Pop Idol's Darius seizes number one with "Colourblind" before the Sugababes topple him with "Round Round".
- **In the news:** Chechen separatists shoot down a Russian Mil Mi-26, killing 127 soldiers; police investigate the shocking murders of two young girls in Soham, Cambridgeshire; Typhoon Rusa proves the most powerful to hit South Korea in 43 years, killing at least 236 people.

ON THE SHELF

- With *Men In Black II* hitting UK multiplexes a month after its Stateside debut (remember when such things were common?), *Radio Times* finds some tenuous pretext for interviewing Will Smith.

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Blastermind
The SFX quiz

ROALD DAHL

Celebrate Roald Dahl Day (13 September) with a quiz about the works of the master storyteller

Quizmaster **Nick Setchfield, Editor At Large**

QUESTION 1
What's the musical link between *Tales Of The Unexpected* and *Doctor Who*?

QUESTION 2
What's Charlie's surname in *Charlie And The Chocolate Factory*?

QUESTION 3
Which of Dahl's books features a magic potion known as Formula 86 Delayed-Action Mouse-Maker?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question
Name this character from the Dahl-scripted Bond film *You Only Live Twice*.

QUESTION 5
Who wrote the songs for the Royal Shakespeare Company's musical adaptation of *Matilda*?

QUESTION 6
What's the name of the character Dick Van Dyke plays in 1968's *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (co-written by Dahl)?

QUESTION 7
Which well-known sitcom star voiced the BFG in Cosgrove Hall's 1989 adaptation?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question
This macabre scene appears in which episode of *Tales Of The Unexpected*?

QUESTION 9
Which 1943 Dahl book featured supernatural creatures from RAF folklore?

QUESTION 10
Name the artist who collaborated regularly with Dahl, and also illustrated the English versions of the Agaton Sax books.

QUESTION 4

QUESTION 8

QUESTION 12

QUESTION 16

QUESTION 11
What's the name of the fantasy kingdom in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*? a) Grimburg b) Vulgaria c) Ghastliana.

QUESTION 12 Picture Question
Name this Dahl film, and the actor who voiced this character.

QUESTION 13
Roald Dahl Plass in Cardiff is the site of which top secret organisation's underground HQ?

QUESTION 14
Which renowned British director helmed the 1990 adaptation of Dahl's *The Witches*?

QUESTION 15
Which actor transforms into a bee in *Tales Of The Unexpected*'s "Royal Jelly"?

QUESTION 16 Picture Question
These characters appear in an adaptation of which classic Dahl story?

QUESTION 17
Who's the head of the Japanese secret service in *You Only Live Twice*?

QUESTION 18
What was the title of Dahl's sequel to *Charlie And The Chocolate Factory*?

QUESTION 19
What power does the titular digit in Dahl's 1966 book *The Magic Finger* possess?

QUESTION 20
What's the title of Dahl's final novel, published posthumously after his death in 1990?

Answers

1 Both themes were composed by Ron Grainer 2 Bucket 3 *The Witches* 4 Kissy Suzuki 5 Tim Minchin 6 Caractacus Potts 7 David Jason 8 "The Landlady" 9 *The Gremlins* 10 Quentin Blake 11 Vulgaria 12 *Fantastic Mr Fox*, George Cloonev 13 Torchwood 14 Nicolas Roeg 15 Timothy West 16 *James And The Giant Peach* 17 Tiger Tanaka 18 *Charlie And The Great Glass Elevator* 19 It shoots bolts of electricity 20 *The Minpins*

How did you do?

Rate yourself by Wonka Bar ticket

0-5	Empty wrapper
6-10	Beige
11-15	Bronze
16-19	Silver
20	Golden

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SFX

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Total Recall

Personal recollections of cherished sci-fi and fantasy

Anjelica Huston as the Grand High Witch. Eeesh.

The Witches

Darren Scott, Grand High Witch, *SFX* division

Growing up, I was a bit of a bookworm – quelle surprise – and by the time I'd discovered Roald Dahl's books, there was no stopping me.

Quite literally, in fact, as I would skip PE in school just so that I could continue reading whatever had caught my fanciful imagination. The only fond memory I have of football is being sat by the pitch – that's what they call the grass field, right? – while my classmates did whatever you do in football and I lost myself in the world of *The Witches*.

I absolutely could not put the book down. The idea that there were witches all around the world who hunted down children – who smell like dogs' droppings to them – both scared and delighted me. So when the live-action movie came along a few years later in 1990, naturally I was eager to see it.

Little did I know it would become one of my all-time favourite films. Directed by Nicolas Roeg (*Don't Look Now*, *The Man Who Fell To Earth*) it goes far beyond a sickly-sweet kiddy romp. That scene with the girl trapped in a painting? Terrifying. When she finally fades from view? The stuff of nightmares that you take with you into adulthood.

With the help of Jim Henson's Creature Shop – for it was he who optioned the book – it feels far darker than it probably needed to be. I was absolutely *enthralled* by Anjelica Houston as the Grand High Witch and her monstrous practical effects transformation. Later I discovered that might also have had quite a lot to do with why I wasn't particularly taken with football, as many gay men of a certain age hold the film close to their hearts.

But that's not to do Houston a disservice, because she's incredible and so, so frightening for a movie aimed at children. I mean, she (almost) pushes a baby off a cliff at one point. Was it wrong that part of the younger me was cheering on the witches? Maybe that explains a lot too...

Then, just when you think all's well with a revised ending (different from the book), lead character Luke and his grandmother plan to set off on a genocidal road trip. What larks! No wonder they don't make films like this any more.

Darren still slightly crumples his nose whenever he's around children.

Fact Attack!

- ***The Witches*** **was the last film that Jim Henson worked on before his death in 1990. It was also Roald Dahl's final film before he died.**
- **Dahl famously disliked the movie, chiefly because the ending differed from the book, and threatened to have his name removed.**
- **The original cut of the movie was edited by director Nicolas Roeg after his son found certain scenes too frightening.**
- **Make-up for Houston's Witch took six hours to apply and a further six hours to remove, making her want to cry on at least one occasion.**
- **A (frankly unnecessary) remake in 2020 came under criticism for depicting witches as having limb impairments.**

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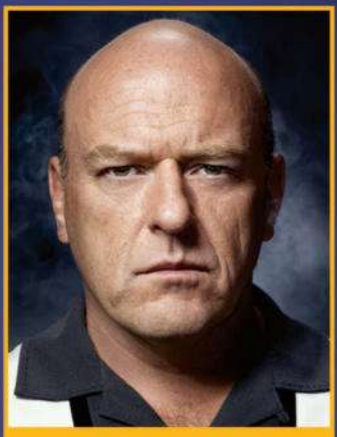

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